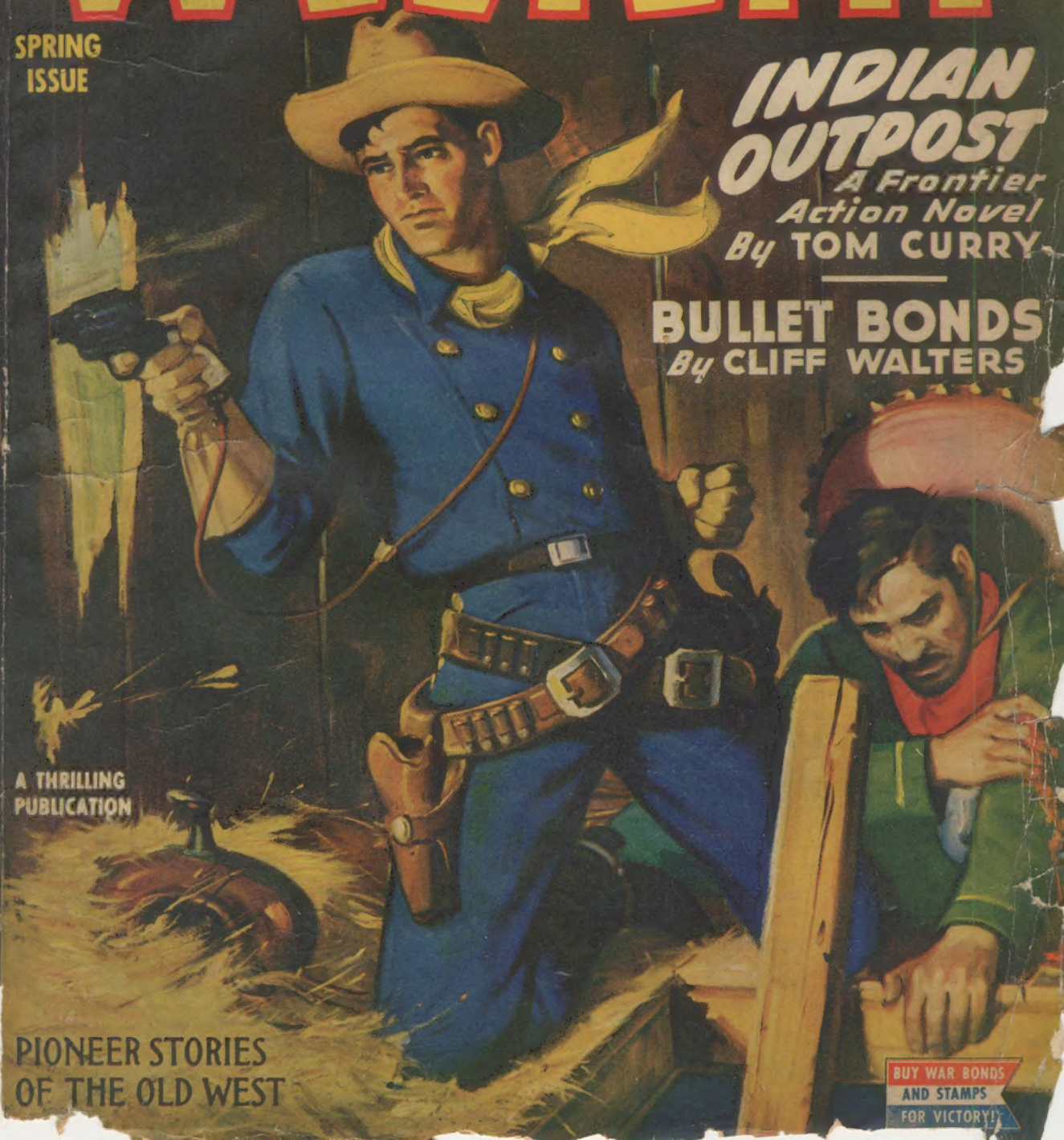
10¢

The Rio Kid Western

SPRING ISSUE

INDIAN OUTPOST
A Frontier Action Novel
By TOM CURRY

BULLET BONDS
By CLIFF WALTERS



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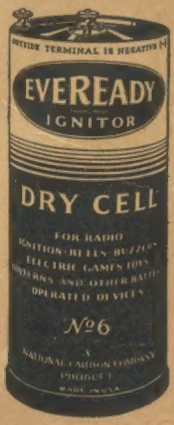
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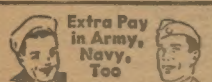

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INDIAN OUTPOST

By

TOM CURRY

Pitting himself against Red Cloud, brutal chieftain of the Sioux, the Rio Kid embarks on a campaign of battle against raiding Indian hordes and vicious white traitors who shatter the peace of the range! 11

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A department conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

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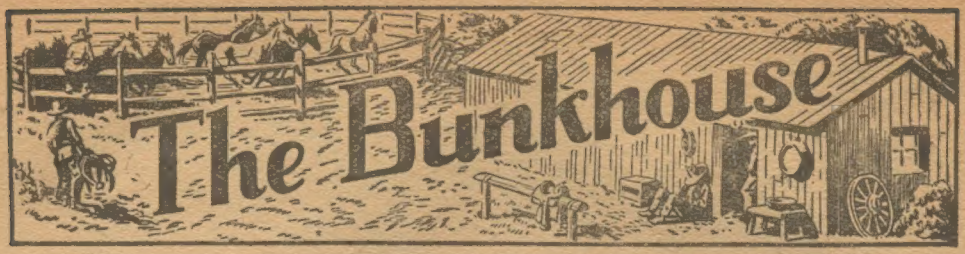

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GREETINGS, waddies, it's time for another session at the Bunkhouse, time for another gabfest and after we get through talking about the weather the conversation will in all probability drift around to hot times in the West, times made hot by hot lead belching from the muzzles of six-guns.

It has usually been the custom of ranchers to build their bunkhouses a little distance from the ranch house proper so that the hilarity of the cowboys would not disturb the rancher's family in the ranch house. Not that the usual run of cowboys were so hilarious, especially after a hard day's ride after cattle, but on certain occasions around any bunkhouse there is more or less noise or merry-making.

Cowboys are, for the most part, practical jokers. They enjoy playing jokes on one another, and then too sometimes a cowboy who has been to town brings back a visitor in the form of John Barleycorn and with such a visitor sometimes there is a celebration, but the person who believes that after riding all day through dust, rain or any kind of weather, cowboys sit up in the bunkhouse or by a camp fire and play cards and sing half the night just don't know the West and the cowboy.

A Long Day's Work

It must be remembered that the cowboy does not check in at eight or nine in the morning and out at five in the afternoon, but many times he has caught up his horse, fed and saddled the animal, had his own breakfast and is in the saddle before daylight and the night may be half gone before his day's work is done.

No cowboy after such a day would be expected to play cards and sing when he is dog tired and sleepy, and it is only when the roundup is over, or the cowboys have leisure time, that they indulge in a lot of hilarity around the bunkhouse, but those occasions, rare as they may be, seem to be the cause for the building of the cowboy sleeping quarters apart from the ranch house.

While a cowboy on a large ranch would not like to live and sleep in the ranch house, because to do so would in a manner cramp his style, he would not feel as free and easy as in the bunkhouse, yet the demeanor of a rancher to his hands is in no way similar to the attitude of the lord and master of an ultra fashionable city mansion or country estate toward his help.

The real cowboy on a real ranch working for a real and typical rancher is less like an employe and more like a partner in the business, drawing his dividends each month, and taking a real interest in the work of handling the cattle.

He will ride out and size up the situation confronting the raising or fattening of a herd and come back to the rancher and express his views clearly and his views are generally respected.

Cowboy Loyalty

In the early days of the cattle industry in the West, a cowboy drawing perhaps only forty dollars per month would not hesitate to risk his life in a gun battle to protect the property of the rancher who employed him, and even today the typical cowboy of the more modern West would do the same thing. He would probably use more strategy and try harder to keep out of a gun-battle, but if there was no alternative his guns would blaze the same as those of the early-day cowboy.

There was one bunkhouse on a ranch in Arizona in the early days of the cattle business in that Territory that was a part of the ranch house, the ranch house and the sleeping quarters of the cowboys built into one big fortlike structure. It was more like a fort than a typical ranch house. It had to be for the protection of the ranching family and the hands. It was designed and built by one of the greatest characters that ever run cattle on an Arizona Range, Pete Kitchen.

A Square, Shrewd Hombre

Pete Kitchen was the connecting link between savagery and civilization in Arizona. He was a rough charcoal sketch of a civilized man. He came to Arizona in 1854 and was not only a rancher, but a great farmer. He farmed rich, broad acres on Potrero Creek near its junction with the Santa Cruz.

(Continued on page 8)

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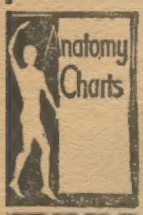

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

He was a man who would have made his mark in most any kind of business. He was square, alert, shrewd, but fate cast him in the role of an Arizona pioneer and fate did the now proud and prosperous state a good deed by the casting.

During the bloodiest days of Indian warfare Pete Kitchen's name was a household word among the white settlers, and the wild Apache feared him more than they did a troop of cavalry.

His hacienda, situated on the summit of a rocky hillock overlooking the valley in every direction, was built of thick adobe. The flat roof was surrounded by a parapet three or four feet high, and a sentinel was constantly posted on the roof to sound the alarm in case of attack.

There was also an armed sentinel posted always in the corral with the stock. The corral fence, mostly an adobe wall, afforded protection to the stock and made a few armed men within the enclosure just too much for a band of Indians armed mostly with bows and arrows.

The Rallying Point

On their raids through the valley the Apaches usually passed by Kitchen's place both going and coming, but did not very often stop. When they did they always got the worst of the visit.

He was almost the last settler to hang on after the withdrawal of the troops in 1861. The Apaches, taking advantage of the withdrawal of the troops, raided and murdered almost at will, and most of the settlers that were not killed off moved to safer sections. His ranch was the safest point between Tucson and Magdalena, and during the darkest days of the Apache warfare, miners, settlers and travelers made it a sort of rallying point.

When the Apaches did attempt to raid Kitchen's place they would try to approach by stealth through the canyon that came in from the east opposite the hacienda, and in case of sudden attack the guard would discharge his gun as a signal to the Indian and Mexican workmen in the fields below.

The men would instantly run for the house, while Pete, or his wife Donna Rosa, would gather up the guns from the corners and wall-racks and lay them out ready for use. By being thus constantly on the alert, they were always able to stand off the Apaches and prevent them from getting up the hill.

A Brave Pioneer Woman

Donna Rosa became so expert in the use and handling of firearms that in case of necessity she was able to carry on the business alone. When the alarm sounded, she would tie her skirts around her to make them look like trousers, would seize her gun, and with the help of the Opata Indians employed on the ranch as much to fight as to work, she would give the Apaches a reception as hot as her Mexican dishes for which she was noted.

Pete Kitchen was about the only settler whom the Apaches could not dislodge. They killed or drove off his bravest neighbors.

They killed so many of his cattle herders that he practically had to quit the cattle business for a time.

Before he built a rock and adobe wall around his pig pens they shot his hogs so full of arrows that they resembled pin cushions. They slaughtered his stepson, but Pete Kitchen fought on undaunted. His name struck terror to every Apache heart; and, at last finding him just too tough for them, they passed him by.

Never Caught Napping

Many stories are told of Pete Kitchen's alertness, marksmanship, and cool courage. He was never caught napping.

He was as ready with his gun as he was sure of his mark. The Indians were never able to ambush him. Grim experience had taught him to be careful when there was Apache "sign"; and to be still more careful when there was no "sign."

He never traveled the same road twice in succession. He seemed to be endowed with a sort of sixth sense that told him when Apaches were lurking for him. Not once but many times he saved his life by his alertness and almost uncanny wariness.

One night he had a feeling of some impending danger, so he took his wife to the dugout on the edge of the rocky hill just below the ranch house and set himself to keep a sharp watch. Crouching just inside the doorway of the dugout he remained silent, watching. Once he thought he detected a movement just below the dugout. A cloud that had added to the darkness passed, and the object seemed closer than before. He fired and there was a terrible yell in reply. He watched on through the night, and in the morning found the buried body of an Apache that had been dragged from the scene and buried further down the hill.

The Tables Turned

Kitchen was a very generous and companionable man; but there was a certain grim jocularity in his dealings with his enemies. He was once riding along the road through greasewood, cactus, and mes-

(Continued on page 92)

TO THE MAN WHO WANTS SUCCESS AFTER THE WAR

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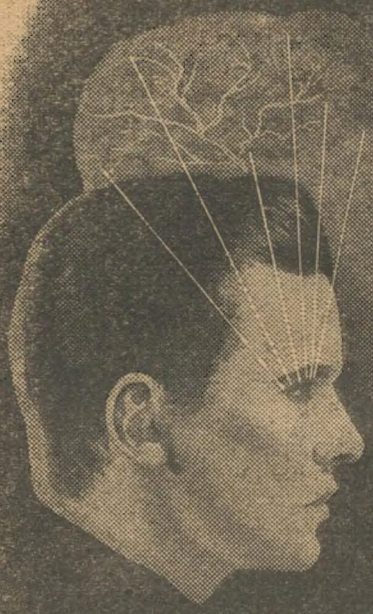
In Your Mind's Eye



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All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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The sentry went down under the lithe bodies of the Rio Kid and Portugee Phillips (CHAPTER IX)

INDIAN OUTPOST

By TOM CURRY

The Rio Kid and his pards battle raiding Indian hordes and vicious white traitors who shatter the peace of the range!

CHAPTER I

Trail to Danger

VAN WEBER found the December wind biting. Although used to the cold of the Wyoming wilderness, he had to beat his big hands on his thighs to keep the circulation going. Yet he was wearing fur-lined buffalo gloves.

Tall, rangy, Weber was traveling the Bozeman Trail, the cut-off which led northwest to the Montana gold fields. Fort Phil Kearney, in 1866 one of the new Army posts set up to protect the trail from the marauding Sioux, was nearby and Weber expected to find white men there and get food and fresh tobacco.

He was clothed in buckskin with a

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH FRONTIER NOVEL

waist-length bearskin jacket that made him huge in the saddle of the powerful black horse, a coonskin cap and high knee-boots. A pack, with a short-handled miner's pick and a shovel stuck in the lacings, rode behind him, while at his hand was a rifle in a thick leather socket. The butt was up and it was loaded and ready to be thrown into action instantly. Outside his coat he carried a belt with two six-shooters and shells for them, because in that land, it was vital that a man be ready to fight without any fumbling around.

For the Sioux were out and these were their hereditary winter stamping grounds. To the west towered their beloved Big Horn Mountains, the summits now white with snow against the leaden sky. Only the evergreens showed signs of life. The trees and bush were bare.

The ground was frozen, a blessing, since it kept the horse from sinking deep in the reddish earth. The new trail, not yet beaten and under constant menace from the Sioux, dropped down a crest and over a creek. Weber paused, to let the black suck in water where it ran free from the encrusted ice. He checked up to make sure he was not being dogged by Indians. "Wagons ahaid, Blackie," he remarked to his gelding.

That meant white men, headed northwest on the Bozeman, and they would doubtless stop at Fort Phil Kearney. Weber was not surprised that men should dare enter the boiling, murderous empire of the mighty Sioux, for there was gold ahead also, and men would do anything for it, even die.

THE Sioux, refusing to knuckle under to the whites, had been angry for years, and fighting. The new trail cut their lands in half. The buffalo and antelope were being slaughtered, animals which gave them food, clothing, tepees and medicine. The great Sioux nation could muster many warriors, and the U. S. Army, cut to the bone after the Civil War, had but a few trained soldiers to combat them. Back in Washington grafters were cheating the Army, and supplying the savages with weapons. The Frontier posts were undermanned and underarmed.

No white was safe on the Bozeman Trail. Weber was used to the feeling of alert readiness, for he was a prospector himself.

His curly brown hair needed cutting, and a shave would have improved his appearance, too. He had a good nose and clear blue eyes. Although his formal schooling had been limited, he was a fine young fellow, strong, steady and honest.

Crossing the creek, a tributary of the Powder River, he pushed on at a fast clip, and about four o'clock that afternoon he came up with several slow-moving wagons. Most of them were of the type called "prairie schooner," although there was one Army ambulance, drawn by mules, in the procession.

At his shout, the rear guard swung in their saddles, ready to assume an attitude of defense, but seeing it was a white man, they waved. A sergeant, with three yellow stripes on his burly arm, and wearing the cavalry Stetson and insignia, greeted him.

"Hullo, Weber. Bound for the fort?"

"Yes, suh. Ev'rything's froze up below. It'll be spring before we do much more minin', Sarge."

There were four troopers with Sergeant Rolls, with whom Weber was acquainted, as he had been to Fort Kearney previously. The owners of the wagons were Americans, evidently gold-seekers bound for Montana. Some were middle-aged, others were their sons, or nephews, in the first flush of youth, and there were women with them, wives and daughters.

The canvas sides of the vehicles were lashed down to keep out the biting wind. Horses and mules drew the wagons.

The troopers rode close to the Army ambulance, their special charge. There was a window in the side, and Van Weber saw a woman looking out at him. He halted Blackie, staring into large brown eyes and at the white oval of her face. He glimpsed a little fur hat and the upturned collar of a beaver coat. Strands of light hair framed her countenance.

"Why," thought Weber, "she's the most beautiful girl I ever saw!"

His heart raced and his breath came short, as he dropped back by the hard-bitten Sergeant Rolls.

Red Cloud, Brutal Chieftain of the Sioux!

"Where'd you pick up the party, Sarge?" he asked.

"Oh, they joined us along the way, for protection mostly. Those gold-hunters are a fine lot, too. They're ridin' together, under Dave Harrison, the wide galoot in the gray hat over there. They expect to make their piles in Montana, but if the Sioux don't get 'em, the country will." The sergeant lowered his voice. "I got my fingers crossed, Van. These folks figger five of us can guard 'em from the Injuns. But if those redcats really hit us we won't have a chanct. You savvy that."

Van Weber nodded. Such a caravan might beat off a small party of raiders, but Red Cloud, the head Chief of the Sioux, could muster an army of braves. He passed the sergeant his tobacco plug and Rolls bit off a generous chaw.

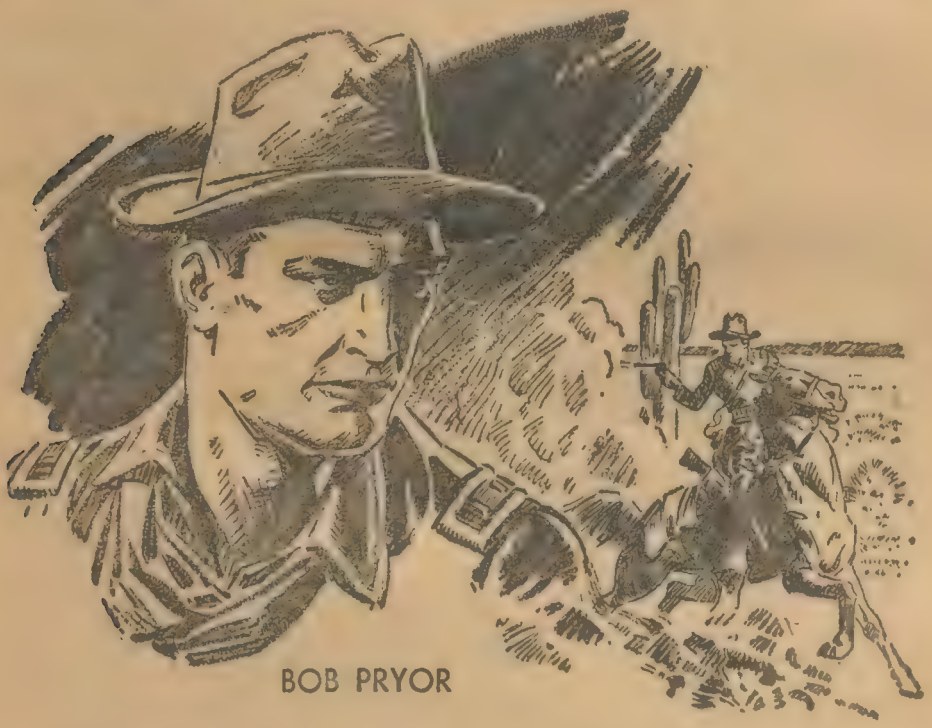
"Who's in the ambulance?" asked Van.

"That's Miss Dora Newton. She's headin' out to marry Lieutenant Smythe at the fort. Some of these gals got a man's sand, Van, they'll dare anything. She's a fine young lady."

SOMEONE stuck a head out of a forward wagon and shouted, "Sergeant!" in a peremptory manner.

"Shucks, there's Flash Davis again!" said Rolls to Weber. But Rolls rode on as though he had not heard. A couple of men jumped out of the wagon and waited by the side of the trail. When Rolls came up, one of them scowled up at the non-commissioned officer.

"Are you deaf, Sergeant?" he demanded. "I don't like your attitude. I have a great deal of influence in Washington and I can have those stripes ripped off your arm at a word, understand?"



BOB PRYOR

Van Weber took a dislike to Davis right then and there. The domineering tones and the man's self-importance were irritating. Political influence didn't entitle Davis to give Rolls commands.

Jerome "Flash" Davis wore an expensive coat over a dark suit, polished boots and fine gloves. A diamond stickpin sparkled in the thick folds of his white stock. He had black hair, and a crisp, waxed mustache. His dark eyes, now

flashing with anger, had been placed too close together. Otherwise, he might have passed as extremely handsome.

"What you want, Davis?" asked Rolls.

"I'm in a hurry to reach Fort Kearney. My wagon's too slow. If you detach the ambulance, you can get me there in good time."

"Thought I told you before, Davis. That ambulance is occupied."

"The lady won't object to company for a few hours. We can make the fort by dark."

"Can't do it. I'm stayin' here. The Sioux are out, and it's better we stick together."

"These tinhorn gold-hunters aren't your business," declared Davis. "Are you yellow? I'm not afraid of the Sioux!"

Van Weber stared at the angry man. Either Davis was a fool or a man who didn't know the meaning of fear.

"If the Indians do get you, you'll feel diff'rent, Mister," drawled Weber.

Davis threw a scowl in his direction and lifted his upper lip with contempt. He didn't bother to answer the observation.

The man who had come back with Flash Davis was a squat, heavy fellow with sandy hair and green-hued eyes. His nose was broken and his face covered with stubble. He wore a buffalo coat, over trail-dirty clothing, and was armed with revolvers and a knife. A cud of tobacco distorted his leathery cheek.

"G'wan, you're holdin' up the procession, Davis," said the sergeant, at last. "Murphy and you get on back to yore wagon."

Davis snapped an angry threat and hurried away, out of the cold, to his vehicle, trailed by the lumbering Cud Murphy.

"Where yuh expect to camp, Sarge?" asked Van.

"At the next creek. An hour more, mebbe."

"This mornin'," observed Weber, "I cut a war party's trail. It was haided north."

"How many?"

"Oh, about a hundred young bucks."

The sun was a dull disc behind gray clouds as it settled on the foothills of the mighty Rockies. Around five o'clock, Sergeant Rolls ordered a halt, and the wagons were swung into a small circle. Then their wheels were chained together. After the stock, horses and mules, had been hobbled and a guard set over them.

The occupants left the wagons to stretch their sore muscles. Most of them had done some walking, up the grades. Van Weber fraternized with them. He shook hands with Dave Harrison, the wide-shouldered, powerful leader of the gold-seekers, a smiling, friendly man of forty. Harrison's wife was with him, together with his eighteen-year-old son. The father wore a clipped brown beard. His features were even, and his blue eyes held the steady gleam of the born adventurer.

He had done a little mining, but most of his followers were greenhorns who clustered around Weber, questioning him, when they learned he was a veteran in the work.

VAN WEBER was close to the ambulance, watching as Sergeant Rolls moved over to speak with the pretty young woman inside.

"Would you like to get down, Ma'am?" Rolls asked her.

Weber hurried forward to offer a hand. Dora Newton smiled on him as she accepted his help.

Rolls and Weber lifted her gently to the ground.

"This here's a friend of mine, Ma'am," said Rolls. "Meet Van Weber."

"How do you do, sir?" Dora's voice was lovely. Her figure was small, and well-shaped. She had tiny feet, protected by soft, fur-lined boots. Her skin was clear and rosy with the cold, and her eyes had an eager look to them, the look of youth that is intensely interested in everything new.

"Do you live out here?"

"Yes'm," replied Weber.

"It's a beautiful country, isn't it? It must be wonderful in the summer and fall."

"I reckon it is."

Rolls continued to hover about her like an old hen with one chick. He cooked her supper with his own hands, and fixed a bed of blankets for her in the ambulance. Weber learned she had been a school teacher, back East, and again heard she was engaged to a young Army officer, a man he had met at Fort Kearney.

Weber had never fallen in love be-

Staggering aside from the Rio Kid, Horrigan collided with a table (CHAPTER X)

fore, and tried to fight against new and overwhelming emotions, stricken by the thought the girl was betrothed to another man. All her ways showed fine breeding and education.

Van Weber had never known such a woman.

Later, as he ate with Harrison's party, Weber quickly grew to know and like them. They were courageous and cheerful, filled with hope of finding a fortune in Montana. Frank Higsbee was a huge fellow, strong as an ox, with light hair and kind brown eyes. George Brown was tall and stalwart and the Kenny brothers were good men, while Ban Young was another. They had wives and older children along, some of them, and the men gently cared for their loved ones before themselves. Such a trip was hard on a toughened male, and for a woman it was a terrible ordeal. However, to be with their husbands, the wives would dare anything.

Dark fell over the dreary land. The travelers huddled near the log fires, after rough food had been quickly consumed. The food consisted of beans and strips of jerked meat, broiled on the spits, with plenty of strong coffee. Men had to eat and keep from freezing, Sioux or no Sioux.

DORA NEWTON again slept in the ambulance, as women were given the warmer spots, while men rolled in sleeping-bags and blankets.

Van Weber lay down near the sergeant. He had a short nap but he soon awakened, finding the night was as dark as pitch and the sentries replenishing the fires.

In the distance a wolf howled and another replied.

Someone stirred near Van. It was Sergeant Rolls. The sergeant was sitting up, staring at the darkened shape of the ambulance.

In a low voice, Weber offered him fresh tobacco.

"Thanks," said Rolls. "I can't sleep, Van. I got a feelin'."

"Me, too, Sarge."

"Mebbe it was you sayin' yuh'd cut that war party's trail. Only I do get feelin's. There's danger near us."

Weber nodded. He understood such instinctive hunches came to wilderness-trained men.

CHAPTER II

Indian Attack

THE cold was damp, penetrating. The wind soughed in the pines along the slope, and they could hear the low watery rush of the icy stream nearby. For two hours they waited, and then Van Weber raised his carbine.

"Here they are, Sarge," he murmured.

The Sioux struck with a terrible, all-embracing rush. They came out of the shadows on horseback, and Weber and the sentries opened fire at the dark figures charging in. Finding their attempt at surprise had failed, the Indians began to shriek and howl to terrify their victims. Bullets and arrows thudded into the wagons or whirred through the gaps.

Every man who could shoot was out, behind what cover he could find. Sergeant Rolls had one end of the ambulance and Van Weber had taken the other, shooting skillfully at the Indians. The white men turned the first charge, but, as they reloaded and took breath, a massive wedge of horsemen suddenly came plunging straight at the light ambulance.

"Look out—they're goin' to tip it over, Sarge!" bawled Weber.

Their guns knocked over a couple of Sioux horses but the weight of the mass hit the outer side of the ambulance and the vehicle turned over, breaking the circle of defense.

"This way, boys," bellowed Rolls. "They're comin' through!"

Axes, Indian axes, were chopping at the wooden side of the ambulance. In a fighting man's hot fury, yet cool inside and wasting no lead, Van Weber sought to clear the savages away with his Colts, crouching just behind the front of the cart.

Sergeant Rolls rose up, his Army pistols blazing. Leaping to his feet, he confronted the Sioux who were chopping through the wooden side of the ambulance. It was a welter of battling madness for moments, and Rolls cursed magnificently.

Van Weber put a foot on the wheel

and jumped up on the overturned ambulance, shooting pointblank at the foe, trying to turn their attention from Rolls. Harrison and Frank Higsbee leaped to assist, bringing their flaming guns to bear on the Indians hacking at the planks. A couple of additional white men appeared to stem the break in the ring of defense.

Their guns cleared the Indians off the overturned vehicle, and drove back several who were trying to filter through. Weber wrenched open the back door of the fallen ambulance. The Indians had vanished now.

"Dora—Miss Newton!" he gasped. "You—you hurt?"

"Not much," she replied faintly. She was huddled in a corner with her robes and covers. He seized her hand and lifted her out, trying to shield her with his body.

Harrison, Higsbee and several others had stopped another charge. Van Weber carried Dora to the big prairie schooner sheltered by a rock bluff. The Indians continued to yell.

"You're not afraid," Weber said, astonished. "You're not shakin' at all."

"I guess I was too scared to think," she said. She managed to laugh. "I woke up all in a heap."

She had seemed light as feathers in his strong arms. He liked her nerve, and the way she didn't give way to panic. Mrs. Harrison took the girl in, and Weber hurried back to the fight. Driven off, the Sioux were making ready for their next attack.

But Sergeant Rolls had been badly hurt and Harrison and Higsbee had brought him inside the circle of wagons.

"How are you, Sarge?" asked Weber, anxiously.

"I—I'm through, boy," whispered Rolls. "Watch—watch out for the little lady and see—she makes it—all right."

He was riddled with bullets. Two arrows had been pulled from his heaving body.

Van Weber set his jaw. The Sioux were strong enough to hold the party under siege. There were other war parties about and if the Indians brought up more fighters, nobody would get through to Fort Phil Kearney. He didn't like to think of the women and his new-found friends falling into Sioux hands. That would mean torture, and worse than death. As for letting these cruel savages take Dora, it was also unthinkable. He would shoot any white woman before he would allow her to be captured by the Sioux.

"Here they come again," he called. "Get ready. . . !"

AT THIS very moment an alert sentry on Fort Phil Kearney's northwest tower was throwing up his rifle and challenging in the night.

"Halt— Who's there?"

"Never-Say-Die!"

At the password, the sentinel relaxed, and a man leading a horse came from the cold December darkness. Nearby loomed the stockade surrounding the little outpost, set there to protect travelers on the Bozeman Trail. The guard called the corporal, and a gate was unbarred. The scout slipped through.

"Take me to the O.D." ordered the newcomer.

"All right, Rio Kid," said the corporal. "Come on."

In a small cabin, its window openings screened by heavy cloth and lighted inside by candles, the Rio Kid reported to the Officer of the Day. He was a stalwart, handsome young captain of cavalry, in blue tunic and fine trousers and boots. He had a strong jaw and a quick smile, and though but a youth, was a veteran of the Civil War and had acquitted himself in battle with high courage.

"Cap'n Fetterman," reported the Rio Kid, "Red Cloud is collectin' every buck in the Sioux Nation and he's callin' in other tribes, too. Portugee Phillips and I have checked mighty keerful, and we find they got plenty of guns and ammunition."

William Fetterman's mustached lip curled. "Thanks, Rio Kid. I only hope your report is correct. If Red Cloud brings his men within striking distance of this fort, we'll wipe them all out!"

The Rio Kid stared at the officer. He had known Fetterman during the War. In regular battle, Fetterman was reckless but he did well. However, Fetterman held the Sioux in contempt, for he was green at such work and would not listen to advice. Many officers, transferred to the Frontier, considered the savages a minor issue, just as Fetterman did.

"It'll take more men than we have here to wipe out the Sioux, Fetterman."

"Nonsense! If the colonel would give me eighty troopers, I'll ride through the whole Sioux nation."

Bob Pryor, known along the Frontier as the Rio Kid, had been out scouting for forty-eight hours in the frozen hills. His lips were blue, his skin was chafed red from the icy wind. Pryor, too, had been a captain of cavalry, under Custer, in the Civil War, but he had been discharged after the struggle, and had returned to the Border. He was a handsome young fellow, lithe and shrewd as a Sioux and with a white man's confidence.

Bred in Texas, his powerful torso tapered to a fighting man's lean waist, and there was no superfluous fat on him. His bronzed cheeks glowed with health. Under his furs he had on a blue tunic and cavalry pants and belt, relics of his Army days. Holstered six-shooters hung from his belts and under his shirt he carried spares. Hardened to peril, he was not contented unless leading a dangerous life.

There was an impressive look to him. Sun wrinkles showed at the corners of his deep-blue, alert eyes. He kept his chestnut hair cropped short.

"Portugee went down the other side of the ridge," said Pryor. "He ought to be in before long. But look here, Cap'n." The Rio Kid wished to avoid an argument over the strength of the Sioux. "We saw a war party stalkin' a wagon train on the trail, mebbe fifteen miles south. There was an Army ambulance among the wagons."

Fetterman frowned. "I'll have to report this to the Colonel, Rio Kid. Have a drink and a smoke."

Pryor loosened his jacket, to warm himself at the red-hot pot-belly stove, stoked with wood. A moment later he turned as the door opened, thinking Fetterman had come back. But it was a slim Mexican youth who sprang across to seize his hand.

"Gen-e-ral! I am glad to see you!"

IT WAS his trail-mate, Celestino Mireles, a lad whom the Rio Kid had snatched from death on the Rio Grande. Mireles had followed him on the Frontier. Under a buffalo robe he wore velvet pants and jacket. His hair was black. He had an eagle nose, and a proud look about him.

Fetterman stuck his head in the door. "Colonel Carrington wants you, Rio Kid."

Pryor followed Fetterman across the parade ground to Headquarters. The Rio Kid was well-acquainted with Colonel Henry B. Carrington, commanding officer of Fort Phil Kearney. Roused from sleep by Fetterman, Carrington had donned his blue overcoat and pulled on his boots. He acknowledged the scout's salute.

"That ambulance must be the one bringing Lieutenant Smythe's fiancée, Miss Dora Newton," said the colonel. "Tell me what you saw, Rio Kid."

Pryor repeated his report.

"The others are probably gold-seekers, late coming through," said Carrington. "We must help them."

Carrington was over forty. The Rio Kid had known him when he was serving with the 18th U. S. Infantry during the War. Born in Connecticut, Henry Beebe Carrington was a splendid soldier and a grandson of a partner of Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin. He had graduated from Yale Law School, and had taught at the Irving Institute. Encouraged by Washington Irving, the writer, he had won recognition as a student of military science and as an engineer. In the Civil War he had advanced to the rank of brigadier-general, and afterwards his record had won him a commission in the Regular Army.

At Fort Phil Kearney, which he had built six months before, Carrington had five hundred troops, four pieces of artillery, wagons with civilian drivers, scouts, steam sawmills and a few ambulances. From the start, the Sioux had kept the post under almost constant siege. Red Cloud was determined to destroy the invading whites, but by excellent strategy and vigilance, Carrington had managed to avert any large-scale disaster.

The Rio Kid loved Carrington. The commanding officer was a splendid soldier, no crazy fool to throw his men to bloody, useless death. He had a fine, trained mind and at the moment he was engaged in a tremendous struggle with Red Cloud and the Sioux, while one hand was tied behind his back by the indifference of Washington in supplying reinforcements and proper supplies, and the rapacity of thieving whites who smuggled new weapons and ammunition, for profit, to the redmen.

FORT PHIL KEARNEY

THIS little outpost, set to protect travelers on the Bozeman Trail, which branched off the main Oregon Trail, and led to the Montana gold fields, was begun in July, 1866, and completed in a few weeks. It was a log stockade, and right in the heart of the Sioux hunting ground. Red Cloud and his braves were furious and kept the Fort under siege most of the time.

Colonel Henry B. Carrington was commanding officer. He had around five hundred men, four cannon, two hundred twenty-six wagons with civilian drivers, a few ambulances in which intrepid young wives of Army officers dared to make the trip to join their husbands.

On December 21, 1866, the wood train, going out for fuel, was attacked a mile and a half from the stockade, three officers and seventy-seven men being in it. Captain William J. Fetterman was in command. He was brave but green at Indian fighting, and the Sioux wiped them out.

John Portugee Phillips rode two hundred thirty-six miles in zero weather to Fort Laramie to bring help. The Fort was undermanned, they had only a handful of ammunition.

After all these sacrifices, Fort Phil Kearney was abandoned August 20, 1868, and the Sioux burned it before the troops were out of sight.

Carrington had dedicated his life to winning the new land. This struggle dominated everything, a long, endless campaign. The Rio Kid, too, had grown intrigued by this problem of opening up the country to white settlement. This was the growth of the United States, the new nation forming from ocean to ocean. The Sioux must give way, for with their nomadic life they needed too much land and their ways were dangerous.

Men had died to protect the trail. They had fought bravely, Carrington's handful, sneered at and neglected by the thoughtless East. Carrington meant to see they had not died in vain. Pryor understood the C.O. and his problems, and he hoped to help Carrington, whom he revered.

"I'll send Captain Powell with a detachment to bring that train in," went on Carrington. "Are you able to guide them, Rio Kid?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready," said Pryor instantly.

Carrington nodded, with gratitude, to the scout.

"Colonel," continued Pryor, "Red Cloud is plannin' something big. More and more war parties have come near us. I'd say the Sioux are makin' ready for an all-out attack."

"You believe that? Have they enough ammunition, and guns to arm all their warriors?"

"They ain't savin' bullets at all, but shootin' as they please. Portugee and me had sev'ral narrow escapes while we were out."

CARRINGTON frowned. He, too, was aware that white men were arming the Sioux. Traitorous whites, who were responsible for the death of valiant men on the Frontier. The Indians could not be blamed for fighting. They were trying to keep their huge hunting grounds and save their way of life, barbaric and wasteful as it was. But there could be no excuse for white traitors who sold their own kind for cash.

Fetterman had been listening.

"Sir, may I take the rescue party tonight, instead of Powell?" he askad.

Carrington shook his head. "You're on duty, Captain." As Fetterman, feeling the rebuke, bit his mustached lip, and reddened in chagrin, Carrington added more leniently, "But you'll have a chance again before long. I promise you that."

The Rio Kid knew Fetterman as a brave man, but as over-confident about the Sioux. Those who underrated these red warriors usually paid for it with their lives.

A bugle rang out. Troopers, quickly clad, carbines loaded, were saddling up. Going outside, the Rio Kid snatched a hot drink and a bite of food, and rubbed down his war horse, Saber.

The dun had a black stripe down his back, "the breed that never dies." Bad-tempered with strangers and stranger horses, Saber was a fierce fighter and had carried the Rio Kid through the battles of the Civil War.

Under a slice of moon and stars which were intermittently blotted out by driving gray clouds, Captain Powell and his men, guided by the Rio Kid, slipped from the fort's south gate and hit the snowy trail. They rode swiftly on the beaten track. An hour out from the fort, the wind brought the Rio Kid the sound of gunfire. The party speeded up, as the men clasped their carbines and got ready for battle.

CHAPTER III

A Chance for Riches

CAPTAIN POWELL was a young Army officer of Fetterman's class at West Point, and a Civil War veteran. Pryor had known him during the conflict. Second in command of the detachment was a good-looking lieutenant, Jack Smythe, whose fiancée, Dora Newton, was on her way to the fort to marry him. Smythe was impatient, eager to press forward, since learning that the Sioux were attacking the wagon train. A crony of Fetterman's and with the same inborn recklessness, Jack Smythe was inclined to wildness. The Rio Kid knew that, at times, the young fellow drank heavily, perhaps to relieve the loneliness of the Frontier life.

The Rio Kid spoke to Powell. "I'll see how it stands, Cap'n, before yuh attack."

"Right." Powell slowed the column of troops, allowing the scout to forge ahead.

There would be Indian scouts watching to prevent surprise. The Rio Kid moved fast, however, trusting to the dun's great speed to carry him past. Firing grew louder, and blood-curdling shrieks mingled with the guns.

The Bozeman Trail had been slashed from virgin bush, and formed a lighter, winding way in the shadowy wilderness. Saber rippled his black stripe, snorting, warning his master. He had scented Indian ponies, shaggy, wild, near at hand.

A bullet sailed over the Rio Kid's head, fired from ambush close beside the trail. The carbine had exploded on his right and he fired back at the flash. Powell would hear and bring up his men, and the Rio Kid dashed on. The trail dipped and the dun splashed through the icy waters of a creek and up onto a rise. In the middle of this strategic ground stood the wagon train and from it bellowed buffalo guns and carbines. Circling the wagon train were the wild riding Sioux.

But the Indian scouts had already reported the approach of the cavalry, and the sub-chiefs were ordering a withdrawal. With a final vicious burst of gunfire, the Sioux whirled away, swerving south, and headed for the hills.

The Rio Kid pumped lead after the flying shadows. Then he turned toward the train.

"Hold it, gents!" he shouted. "The Army's here!"

A cheer rang from the rescued whites. Soon Powell and his squadron came splashing across the creek and hurried in. The Rio Kid dismounted, and the relieved men slapped him on the back or pumped his hand.

"That you, Rio Kid. I'm Van Weber."

The tall prospector loomed up before Bob Pryor. In the faint light, as the embers of the fire were fanned up, the Rio Kid stared at Weber, with whom he was well acquainted.

"I'd never have recognized yuh, Van!" said the scout.

Weber's face was black with battle grime, and caked with blood from scratches. He had a couple of superficial arrow wounds, and his clothing was torn.

Branches were tossed on the fire, and they crackled up. The confused scene

grew clearer. Sergeant Rolls was dead, and half a dozen men had been wounded.

"You fought like a hero, Van, my boy," said Dave Harrison.

Weber was embarrassed by the praise. He introduced Harrison to the Rio Kid, and other gold-hunters gathered around, Higsbee, the young giant with light hair and the calm eyes, the Kennys of Philadephia, the Youngs from New Jersey and others. There were women and older children, and the Rio Kid heard words of a flood of gratitude for bringing the troops to their rescue.

"They're the kind Carrington wants," he mused. While they sought for gold, some would settle and develop the wilderness.

"Dora!"

"Jack!"

THE Rio Kid turned as Lieutenant Jack Smythe clasped Dora Newton in his arms.

"She's a beauty," thought Pryor, enviously. In the firelight he could see her pretty face. Less than twenty, still, he decided.

She drew the Rio Kid's sympathies. He seldom saw such a girl on the Frontier. Obviously she had a good education and was of a well-to-do family, without knowledge of the Frontier's stark savagery.

Van Weber stood, staring, as Smythe greeted Dora. His jaw was set. Dora was promised to another man and Weber must stand back, helpless. He had fought to defend her for another man.

"I'll never meet anyone else like her," he thought bitterly.

Flash Davis strode to the center of the circle and tugged at Captain Powell's arm. His elegant clothing was still clean, making it plain he had taken no part in the battle, but had remained safe and sound in his wagon while the others fought.

"Look here, Captain," Davis said in impatient tones, "suppose we stop wasting time and hurry on to the fort? That sergeant got just about what he deserved. He was a stubborn jackass."

Powell stared at Davis in cold anger.

"Sergeant Rolls died in the performance of his duty," he said. "And I am in command here."

A smile touched Davis' lip. "You military men are thick-headed, aren't you? If Rolls had taken my advice, he'd be alive now."

"And all the rest of us daid," muttered Dave Harrison.

Face red with anger, Powell glared at Davis and turned away. Davis was a civilian, however, and not under military authority, so Powell ignored him, and gave his orders. The party prepared to return to the fort.

The sun was a pale, ineffectual ball in the gray sky when they sighted the log stockade marking Fort Phil Kearney. Wood smoke hung over the place and the creek was sheathed with crusts of ice. A bugle sent clear frosty notes into the wintry air. The guards on the stockade posts cheered as the gates were opened and the wagon train went inside.

Colonel Carrington, spick-and-span in his blue uniform, was waiting to greet the members of the party. He shook hands with Dave Harrison and his friends, welcoming them to Fort Phil Kearney.

The thick logs of the fort were sunk deep into the dirt and reinforced by rock foundations. Carrington had done a good job. Starting the middle of July, he had finished it within a few weeks, while Red Cloud harried him. Always there hung over life the enemy, the angry Sioux, even in the spring when the tribes moved eastward to the plains to hunt the buffalo, their main food supply.

Now the parade ground was an expanse of frozen mud. There were barracks and kitchens, stables and storehouses, cabins and huts, all built from wilderness timber. In the center the Flag waved proudly from its tall spruce pole.

"Hey, Rio Kid! Glad you made it."

Pryor, exhausted from lack of sleep, grinned at a lanky man with long dark hair and a sharp face, who had called out. It was his companion scout, John "Portugee" Phillips.

Portugee was wearing buckskins, moccasins and a buffalo coat, and a wad of tobacco was bulging one of his hairy cheeks. He was a first-class trapper and scout, working for Carrington as did the Rio Kid.

"So you got back, Portugee?"

"Shore. Had a tough time slippin' through, though. Red Cloud's got a big new supply of cartri'ges and guns from somewheres, dang him. Thar's somethin' goin' on."

CURTLY the Rio Kid nodded. He also had discovered the Sioux were planning a big attack. But he had to get some rest. Going to his bunk, he was asleep almost before he had stretched out straight, Mireles caring for the dun.

When he woke it was dark, and he was hungry as a bear in spring. Stoking up, he went over to the Post Exchange, where Van Weber, Dave Harrison, Frank Higsbee and the gold-hunters were smoking and talking. A large pot-bellied stove glowed red, making the building pleasantly warm. They hailed the Rio Kid boisterously.

"Sit down and drink, Rio Kid," invited Harrison. "We need your advice."

"What's up?"

"Do you think we got any chance of gettin' through to Montana this year?"

Pryor shook his head. "The mountain passes are plumb clogged with snow by now, Harrison," he said. "Anyway, who says all the gold is in Montana?"

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Harrison.

"Why, I can show yuh a fine streak not twenty-five miles from here," answered the young scout. "I run into it while I was huntin' in the mountains last fall. It looked mighty rich."

Men's eyes narrowed and gleamed. They grew intense at the mention of gold.

"Why don't yuh work it yoreself, Rio Kid?" asked Weber.

"I might do a little placer minin' now and then, boys, but diggin' gold ain't my line. I'll show yuh the spot, though, and if you have any luck yuh can cut me in for a share. Soon as it thaws I'll take you folks there. Yuh can't move for a while, anyway. They say Montana is so crowded all the good places have been staked."

They shook hands, cementing their friendship.

From the corner, a couple of violins and an accordion struck up, "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Thus, despite the Sioux, always waiting to strike them down, men made music and dreamed of gold.

In the meantime, Flash Davis was pacing outside, in the cold December night. The sounds in the Post Exchange hardly registered on his consciousness. He was busy with his thoughts, for he had not made the long trek from the Missouri for nothing. There were large profits in sight and money was his god.

Cud Murphy moved up and spoke. "He's over here, Boss. Come on."

"Did he make out successfully?" demanded Davis eagerly.

"Shore. He'll tell yuh about it."

Murphy led Davis across the frozen parade ground to a small hut. It's windows were covered by heavy cloth, to keep out the wind. They went inside the snug interior where a little stove and a wood fireplace furnished heat.

There was only one man there.

"Howdy, Chief," the tall fellow said to Davis, shaking hands.

"Well, Horrigan, how'd you make out?"

"Fine."

Art Horrigan was bony, with a cadaverous face and a fringe of goatee on his pointed chin. His sparse brown hair had been combed over his bulging forehead. Although his skin was deeply weather-beaten, his eyes had a fishy glaze strange in a land of clear-eyed men. He wore a greasy leather shirt and dark woolen pants. From the rear pocket of these stuck the handle of a six-shooter.

"Sit down, Chief, and I'll tell yuh all about it. I saw yuh come in but figgered it wiser not to show."

"That's right, Art. Those orders stand. I like to keep myself clear, you know."

"I savvy. Have a drink."

HORRIGAN pushed the whiskey bottle to Davis.

"You saw Red Cloud? He paid up?"

"You bet. I got furs and clean gold dust. It's on its way back in our wagons."

Flash Davis was an important cog in the machine which supplied the Indians of the Frontier with rifles of the newest types, ammunition, whiskey and trinkets. The ring had powerful influence in Washington. It was to their advantage to keep the Sioux and other tribes going and strong, for they were piling up money. The wealth of the continent, valuable furs and gold taken by the thousands of redmen, and loot seized from white victims, poured into the coffers of Davis' criminal organization.

Red Cloud, as the most powerful leader of the biggest tribe, was their best customer. In his fight against the white men, Red Cloud used all his great tribe's resources.

Greed for money had always been the ruling mania of Jerome Flash Davis. He had started out as a petty gambler and graduated into a confidence man. Then he had made his Washington connection and thrown himself into the business of supplying the Sioux.

"I rushed out to see you, Horrigan," explained Davis, "because the boys 've just turned a neat trick. We got hold of five thousand regulation repeating rifles, the newest make. They were manufactured for the Army but we managed to have 'em condemned, and they're ours now. Plenty of ammunition, too. Red Cloud ought to sell his hide for the stuff."

Art Horrigan nodded, sticking out his thick underlip. "He would. Even with what we just sold him, he's short. I understand he's got a couple of neighborin' tribes on the verge of jinin' his fight. He could bribe 'em with them guns."

"Good. I want to see the old rascal myself."

"He's pretty well cleaned out right now. It'll take time for him to collect enough loot to pay up."

Davis frowned impatiently. "There's plenty to be gotten. Why, he'd find a fortune right here in this fort! All these gold-hunters are heeled and three-months' soldiers' pay just came through last week, in time for Christmas. There's no place to spend it but here."

"Shucks, Red Cloud'd give his eye-teeth to take this fort, Davis. But he can't do it."

"Does he savvy how weak it really is?"

"Shore, he does. But still it's too much for a passel of Injuns to storm. Red Cloud hasn't got artillery, his bucks are skeered of cannon, like all of 'em. It ain't their idee of good strategy to attack head-on, no ways."

"I don't think Carrington has much ammunition to spare, has he?"

Horrigan shrugged. "He keeps it secret. But from what I've been able to smell out, thar's heap little reserve."

Flash Davis thought that over. "It would pay us well if I helped Red Cloud destroy this fort, Horrigan. He'd make us rich. Why can't he lure some of the garrison out and ambush 'em? Then he might be able to rush the place."

"Carrington's mighty wary, and a good soldier, Chief. He savvies how to fight the Sioux."

Sioux, with torches, were blocking the Rio Kid's escape (CHAPTER V)

"All soldiers are dumb," snarled Flash Davis. "I'll figure it out and see Red Cloud."

"You got that medicine tooth I sent yuh?"

Davis nodded. He took from his pocket a short necklace made of bear teeth. Some Indian craftsman had worked soft, virgin gold onto the points, and the big white teeth had Indian markings on them.

"That's it," nodded Horrigan. "As I wrote yuh, Chief, no Sioux would touch a hair of yore haid while yuh tote that. It's Red Cloud's pass. Yuh can go anywheres with it. But be careful to wear it in plain sight or yuh'll lose yore scalp."

"Good. I'll see him tomorrow."

Horrigan frowned. "Be plumb prudent. Carrington'll skin yuh alive if he finds what we're up to. And I doubt if he'll let yuh leave the fort, just now. Too dangerous."

Flash Davis laughed. "I know how to handle Carrington and his kind." He sneered.

"Carrington's an old fool!"

CHAPTER IV

A Traitor Bargains

IN THE morning, Davis hired a light wagon and two mules to draw it, for there were plenty of vehicles stuck at Fort Phil Kearney. As he made known his determination to push on, however, Colonel Carrington approached him.

"Look here, Davis, I can't allow you to proceed over the trail at this time," the Army officer began. "The Sioux are out. And even if you could get past them, there may be a blizzard at any moment."

Flash Davis stared into the soldier's troubled eyes. "Colonel, my business is so important I'm determined to go anyway. If I die, it'll be my own affair."

"Yuh haven't a chance, Mister," growled the Rio Kid, standing nearby. "Red Cloud'll hang yore scalp on his lodgepole by nightfall."

"No one asked your opinion," replied Davis severely. To Carrington he went on, "After all, Colonel, I'm a civilian. You've no authority to hold me here."

What Davis said was true. Carrington frowned and bit his mustached lip. Then he said, coldly, "Very well, sir. It's on your own foolish head." The colonel waved his arm, and the men at the gate opened up to let Davis' rig through.

Cud Murphy drove. Davis sat back, with heavy buffalo robes covering him against the cold wind. The trail looked clear, as it ran over the ridge and dropped into pine forests. They moved rapidly for a time, until, glancing back, Davis found the little outpost was out of sight behind the rise.

He extracted the beartooth necklace from his inner pocket and held it up, in plain sight. After another half-mile, big Sioux warriors sprang out from both sides, flourishing shining new carbines, and seized the reins.

Flash Davis waved the talisman in front of their eyes. The sight of the savage, grim faces, streaked with warpaint and set with determination, sent a thrill of fear through his heart but he was sure of his position. Cud Murphy knew a little of the Sioux dialect. He kept repeating Red Cloud's Indian name. Soon the Sioux nodded. They had their ponies nearby, and rode with the wagon through the snowy wilderness for about a mile. Then they motioned for Davis and Murphy to get down. On foot, they guided them to a bivouac, hidden in a ravine which cut off the wind and where great rock cliffs offered protection for the fires.

Sioux had hurried on ahead to warn of the white men's coming, and Red Cloud awaited them.

The chief stood in the center of a group of his men, sub-chiefs who obeyed his commands with implicit faith. Red Cloud was a magnificent savage, tall, broad of shoulder, with long arms and legs, beautifully proportioned. He had the wide, high cheekbones of the typical Sioux, a large head and long face, dominated by the grim wide mouth and the eagle curve of his nose. Sheening black hair hung to his bronzed shoulders, adorned by a single eagle feather dyed white at the tip.

Although over forty, Red Cloud showed no sign of aging. His skin was brown satin, his smoky black eyes proud fiery in their depths. Two curving, deep lines ran from the man's nostrils to the

corners of his thin-lipped mouth, accentuating the strength of the jaw. In beaded leggins and fringed shirt, moccasins of the finest quality and a fortune in furs draped carelessly on his shoulders, Red Cloud was a breathtaking picture of savage power.

This was Colonel Carrington's opponent. Flash Davis swallowed with awe as he stared up into the chief's eyes.

"How, Red Cloud," began Flash Davis, waving the talisman so the chief could easily see it.

THROUGH Cud Murphy and a half-breed, named Indian Wells, Davis conducted his negotiations. The interpreter described the new rifles and Red Cloud's eyes glistened. He wanted them. But when Davis told him the price, Red Cloud shook his head, opening both his hands to show they were empty.

"Tell him there's plenty of money in the fort," said Davis. "I'll help him take it. Carrington's low on men and ammunition as well. Cut off the wood train. They have to go out for wood every few days. That'll whittle 'em down!"

Red Cloud was listening. Finally he nodded. The negotiations were soon concluded, and then Flash Davis and Cud Murphy started back to Fort Phil Kearney.

As they came within sight of the outpost, Murphy whipped up the mules. Flash Davis, a rifle to his shoulder, fired wildly over the heads of pursuing Sioux, whose shrieks and gunshots gave verisimilitude to the show. It looked as though the two men in the rig were running headlong before the maddened Indians. The gates of the fort were held open, and the heaving, lathered mules, snorting with fright, went rushing into the stockade.

The Sioux came close but turned and shook their rifles, howling and threatening, as Davis descended in the compound.

Colonel Carrington gravely looked at Flash Davis' reddened face.

"You're very lucky, Davis. I thought you'd be dead by this time."

"You—you were right, Colonel!" stammered Davis. "I couldn't get through. We had a mighty narrow escape."

Unaware of the rapacious traitors within the gates of Fort Phil Kearney, the Rio Kid made his plans to assist his friend and commanding officer, Colonel Carrington, in bringing white civilization to northern Wyoming.

He had, during a hunting trip the previous autumn, observed signs of gold in the hills south of the outpost. Dave Harrison and his party, including Van Weber, who had taken up with them, were splendid men. In the spring, the Sioux must move to the plains, to hunt the returning buffalo. The Indians had to eat, and while Red Cloud might leave some small forces to harass the fort, proper precautions would prevent the prospectors from being overwhelmed.

As a civilian scout drawing Army pay, the Rio Kid had duties to perform. Heat was supplied by wood-burning stoves in the fort, and food was cooked by the same fuel. A large amount was needed, and wood details, under guard, went out to gather logs at regular intervals. As the hills close to the outpost had been denuded, it was necessary to go out farther each time.

The garrison planned a Christmas celebration. A cold snap had descended upon the land, and that morning broke gray and with a threatening sky. The holidays and the icy wind made extra fuel imperative. Carrington ordered an extra supply collected.

The Rio Kid, on the dun horse, scouted ahead of the wagons and escort of cavalrymen. Snow crunched under Saber's hoofs, and the creak of wheels and cursing of mule-skinners filled the frosty air. The dark, stark shapes of evergreens showed on the ridges. A mile and a half from the fort, the Rio Kid pushed Saber over a rise and looked down into the Peno Creek valley, a wild, lovely sight. His eyes were hunting for signs of the Sioux.

"All clear," he signaled.

The sergeant in charge ordered his men to get busy, and axes rang out. For a time, the work went on undisturbed.

A RIFLE crack sent the Rio Kid plunging into action. A soldier cutting timber out from the main body, dropped his axe, clapped a hand to his shoulder, and ran, stumbling, back toward the wagons.

"Cuss 'em," muttered the Rio Kid, as the red foe swept down on them in semi-circular formation, riding with barbaric fury.

Soldiers and civilians took up a position of defense behind the heavy wagons.

The Rio Kid reached the sergeant's position.

"I'll hustle back and report to the colonel, Sarge," he said.

He flashed away, eluding the ends of the pincers that closed as the ends of the Sioux line swept around. Long-range slugs hunted him but in record time he reached the nearby fort.

Carrington was inside, with several of his officers, as the Rio Kid entered hastily.

"Sir, they've hit the wood train. 'Bout a hundred, I'd say."

Carrington leaped to his feet. "Captain Powell!"

"Yes, sir."

"Take Lieutenant's Smythe and Brown and their squadrons, and relieve the wood train."

Captain Fetterman, working on a report close at hand, jumped up, saluting the C.O.

"Sir," he pleaded, "let me take the detail. I've been smartin' for another crack at 'em. They got away from me two weeks ago but they won't this time."

Carrington shook his head. "I can't afford a free-for-all with the Sioux just now, Captain. I want the wood train relieved, and that's all."

"Right, sir. But let me have the relief."

Fetterman was shaking with emotion. He craved action. Powell had suffered a frost-bite during the night ride when he had followed the Rio Kid to save Harrison's wagon train, and hadn't fully recovered.

"Very well, Fetterman. The Rio Kid will scout for you."

Fetterman laughed in delight. Within minutes after the bugle sounded Boots and Saddles, seventy-seven enlisted men, Lieutenant Jack Smythe and young Brown, under Fetterman, were ready to ride from the fort.

They heard distant gunfire as the wood train fought off the Sioux.

"Relieve the wood train, Captain, and drive back the Indians," cautioned Carrington, as Fetterman headed for the gate. "Don't pursue them beyond Lodge Trail Ridge."

"Yes, sir." In high humor, Fetterman saluted smartly, and his powerful voice set his men in motion.

Picking up speed, they followed the dun, ridden by the Rio Kid. A mile clicked off swiftly, and over the next rise they sighted the wagons, with about one hundred mounted Sioux circling and shooting into them.

The redmen swung to fire at Fetterman's force. As Fetterman approached, they broke and retreated, pausing now and then, from their mustangs, to shriek threats and fire wildly.

Having relieved the wood train, Fetterman had completed his orders and it was now his business to return to the fort. The wagons, laden with logs, were being swung and started back. Fetterman stared at the inviting spectacle of the Sioux, so close at hand, warriors riding in full paint and feathers, draped with beautiful furs, waving rifles and lances in challenge.

The Rio Kid knew what was in the officer's mind.

"Ready to go back, Cap'n?" he asked softly.

FETTERMAN bit his lip and frowned at the Rio Kid. Young Jack Smythe, Dora Newton's fiancé—they were to be married Christmas Day—pressed close to Fetterman.

"Let's have a crack at 'em, Fetterman!" he suggested. "We can wipe 'em out and be back inside of an hour."

"Yuh're in command, Cap'n," drawled the Rio Kid, a leg crooked at his saddlehorn. "But the colonel said not to go beyond Lodge Trail Ridge. Red Cloud has a lot more men around than what yuh can see."

Fetterman's handsome face reddened. "I hope you're right," he broke in, curtly. He had a contempt for civilian scouts, whom he considered shiftless, ignorant and rather stupid. "I'll teach these savages a lesson they'll remember. Pryor, you were an Army officer. Now you're a civilian. Will you take a message back to the fort for me or shall I send one of my troopers?"

Fetterman made no attempt to hide his disdain. His manner was insulting, but the Rio Kid held in his temper. He shrugged and replied.

"I'll take it."

As the Rio Kid headed back to the fort with the message, Fetterman signaled his men and the Army mounts broke into a trot, heading toward the ridge behind

which the Sioux had retreated.

Pryor hurried to the C.O. When Carrington read Fetterman's message, he flushed, his fists clenching. "He's gone on to attack," said Carrington. "I've got to save him, Rio Kid. We can't afford to squander those men."

The Officer of the Day hurried in. "There's heavy firin' beyond Lodge Trail Ridge, sir!"

CHAPTER V

Fetterman's Folly

AN EXPERIENCED campaigner, Carrington knew the full danger. His subsequent orders were concise and to the point. The whole fort might be in jeopardy, and all within it, should he lose such a large force.

Captain Powell swiftly formed the second relieving force of eighty, with two small field howitzers, and Carrington mounted his war horse, a beautiful gray charger, taking the lead himself.

The Rio Kid was out ahead. Two miles from the fort he reached Lodge Trail Ridge, with the Peno Valley spreading out in splendor before him. He swung about to signal that he had found what they were hunting. Carrington and Powell pushed up. Their hearts dropped, and Carrington gasped:

"Swarming with Sioux!"

The Peno Valley, into which Fetterman had led his men, was alive with Sioux. Thousands of Red Cloud's warriors, in feathers and furs, armed with rifle, bow and spear, churned below.

"Can you make out our men, Rio Kid?" demanded Carrington.

"No, Colonel. None that's on his feet, anyways."

"They led Fetterman into a trap," muttered the C.O.

The hundred warriors attacking the wood train had been but a bait, held out to lure the relief into a massacre. Carrington snapped his commands, and the howitzers were placed in position.

The Rio Kid felt a chill not due to the climate; it was the congealing of his blood as he took in what had happened. The Sioux were howling in triumph. Lines of mounted warriors swung out to the flanks, daring the soldiers to come on. Slugs plopped into the snowy ground.

"There's Red Cloud, Colonel," sang out the Rio Kid.

He tried for the chief with his carbine but Red Cloud rode madly, zigzagging. He was a mighty man, on his big, spotted mustang, ribbons trimming the animal's tail and mane.

"Fire!" ordered Carrington. His face was red with suffused blood, for he knew the peril into which they had all been plunged. He had lost a large part of his garrison, much ammunition and equipment. As it was, he had been holding on with his nails to Fort Phil Kearney, under Red Cloud's savage persistence.

The howitzers boomed throatily and puffed smoke. The shells lobbed over Red Cloud and his advance, exploding among a group of Sioux beyond.

Indians were afraid of cannon, the use of which they never mastered, and they split up as the shells burst. Red Cloud swerved and took to the wooded ridge on the west, disappearing from sight.

The Rio Kid, Carrington and Powell, followed by the relieving force, started on, clearing the valley of the Sioux. At the point where they had seen the largest collection of Indians, they found the bodies of Fetterman, Smythe and Brown, with sixty-five men. All lay within a space about thirty-five feet in diameter, their faces toward the fort. Farther on was another officer and three civilians from the fort, and in front of them lay ten dead Indian ponies and seventy blood pools on the snow showed they had defended themselves well until their ammunition was gone.

Not one who had been with Fetterman remained alive.

The sad job of picking up the dead was begun.

Later, the Rio Kid, his body aching from the cold, slid off Saber inside the stockade. Groups stood about, appalled by the catastrophe. Among them were sobbing women, who had lost their husbands. Van Weber moved over beside the Rio Kid.

"Look at her!" muttered Weber.

The Rio Kid glanced at Dora Newton, whose sweetheart, Jack Smythe, had died

in the massacre. Fragile, with her beauty never more apparent, she was staring at the open gates as though expecting to see Smythe ride in.

VAN WEBER approached her, drawn as if by an irresistible magnet.

"Ma'am, there's nothin' much to say. But I wish I could help yuh."

She turned her young, tortured eyes to his stern face, and then she began to weep....

Later, when the early winter night fell on the horror-stricken fort, Carrington called his council.

As trusted scouts, the Rio Kid and Portugee Phillips were there, together with Carrington's remaining officers.

"You know the status of the fort," said Carrington gravely. "A full attack, now, might overwhelm us. We must have ammunition and reinforcements. I need a volunteer to ride to Fort Laramie for help. I won't order anyone to try it."

None in the room knew the dangers of the task better than the Rio Kid and Portugee Phillips. Without the Sioux, the zero weather and the blizzard threatening would have made the two-hundred-fifty-mile run to Laramie a dangerous feat. With Red Cloud's thousands of Sioux on the trails, offering death by torture to any white they caught, it seemed an impossibility. Once the soldiers had gone into the fort, the Sioux had again closed in.

"I'll go, Colonel," said the Rio Kid.

"Me, too," volunteered Portugee Phillips. "That is, if yuh'll lend me a hoss. My own got creased by an Injun arrer."

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Carrington gratefully. "Portugee, I'll give you my own charger."

On Carrington lay the heavy responsibility of protecting the women and children inside the fort, and of maintaining his position. If the Sioux breached the walls, all would die.

Quickly, the Rio Kid and Phillips made ready. The night fell, and heavy clouds from the northwest darkened the sky. This job, the Rio Kid knew, was part of the epic fight which Carrington was waging, and which he had dedicated himself to assist.

Around midnight, the two slipped from the south gate, leading their horses, and taking what cover they could find. They could not follow the main trail for some miles, since the Sioux would be watching it. In the lead, the Rio Kid snaked the dun through the pine woods on the slope, and the wind howled in the trees. Five miles from the fort, the scouts decided to try the road. The valley was narrowing, and the country growing too rough to cross with horses.

It was so dark the Rio Kid could not see Portugee Phillips. "Let's go, Portugee," he whispered, taking the lead.

Phillips, handling Carrington's charger, dropped back a bit. Saber, head down in the biting wind, crossed a ditch and climbed to the frozen road. A gun flashed on the Rio Kid's right, and the ball missed him by inches. He threw up his Colt and let go at the savage, but his gloved fingers were numb and clumsy. A warwhoop rang out, and the Rio Kid sighted torches, carried by Indians. There were Sioux on both sides of him, blocking escape.

With the speed of light he made his plan, putting it instantly into action. If he moved south, they would follow, and bands of savages, that way, might get him. But he might offer Portugee a chance to get through by heading back to the fort, and trying to draw them all after him. Low over the dun, his Colt blasting flame, the Rio Kid spurted north on the Bozeman Trail toward Fort Phil Kearney.

The Sioux patrol leaped upon their horses and set out after Pryor. He managed to shoot his way through the thin line across the road, roaring a challenge, and they all came after him, hot for his blood. It was touch and go. Indians jumped from the flanks, shooting arrows or carbines, but he was moving fast in the howling darkness.

HIS swift horse, Saber, drew away from the Sioux. Perhaps the ruse had given Portugee the needed chance to break clear.

It wasn't long until the Rio Kid was back, close to the clearing in which stood the black bulk of Fort Phil Kearney. He headed for the south gate, meaning to signal the sentry always on guard, as at all the danger points.

"By gravy, the gate's open!" he shouted.

On his left, he suddenly sighted creeping, dark figures on the snow.

For a moment he didn't understand.

Then he yelled, close to the open gate. "Watch it—the Sioux're comin'!"

His shoulder hit the gate. There were men just inside, and the Rio Kid dashed among them. "Shut that gate, you fools!" he snarled.

A pistol flamed, almost in his eyes. He felt the singe of the bullet on his numb cheek. Then he realized there were traitors inside the fort. His Colt boomed back, as he whirled back into them. Sentries came running over, attracted by the hubbub.

The small group of men who had opened the gate scattered under the scout's blasting revolvers. One lay still, face down on the frozen earth. The rest scattered, ducking for nearby cover of buildings. A corporal of the guard and his relief were dashing toward the south gate, as the Rio Kid heard noises just outside, and swung.

There were Sioux there, starting through. He could see the gleam of their eyes and the shape of their feathered heads in the grayish light. He fired his Colts, dropping a couple in the van. It slowed them, as they leaped over the falling bodies.

"This way—this way, South Gate!" bellowed the Rio Kid.

The break in the defenses, offered by traitors inside, might have proved fatal, but the Rio Kid's guns held the breach for the few needed minutes. The sentries hurried in, their carbines spurting fire. Strong shoulders swung the gate to, as guns cleaned the invading Indians from the opening.

Lines of dismounted warriors, out in the darkness, were approaching, swiftly, but the garrison had been fully alarmed.

Bleeding from his wounds, the Rio Kid fought in the thick of it, his rifle cracking at the dark shapes moving around the palisades. The troopers were all out, now, manning the defense. Dave Harrison, Frank Higsbee, Van Weber, their own guns spitting death, joined in to help.

Carrington took charge, directing the defense.

"Colonel," reported the Rio Kid, who was bleeding from several scratches, "someone knifed yore sentry at the South Gate, and they were lettin' in the Sioux when I come along. Phillips went on, to try for Laramie."

Carrington shook his hand. "You're a good man, Rio Kid. Thank you."

"There's traitors in the fort, Colonel. White men. One of 'em is lyin' daid by the gate, where I shot him."

The guns were roaring. Precious ammunition was being expended as the Sioux charged, seeking to draw the garrison's fire. Carrington hurried to the South Gate with the Rio Kid, and a lantern showed up the bearded face of the white man slain by Pryor.

"That's Horrigan's friend, Blinky Yates," declared the commander. "He's been here a couple of weeks."

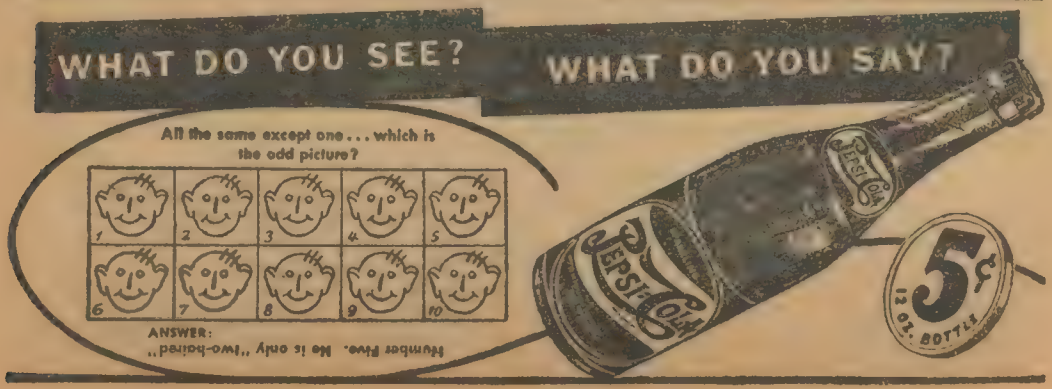
Calling a sergeant and detail, and accompanied by Pryor, Carrington hurried to Horrigan's cabin. Inside, they found Horrigan and three of his cronies busily loading buffalo guns.

"Just gettin' ready to come and give a hand, Colonel," cried Horrigan, seeing the stern-faced visitors.

"One of yore pards is layin' daid at the South Gate, Horrigan," growled the Rio Kid, facing the bony trader.

SCOWLING, Horrigan began to curse. "Did the Sioux get him?"

[*Turn page*]


WHAT DO YOU SEE?
WHAT DO YOU SAY?
All the same except one . . . which is the odd picture?
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6 7 8 9 10
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Number Five. He is only "two-haired"
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"No, I did. He was there with some other scalawags to open the gate for the Indians."

"Yuh don't say!" exclaimed Horrigan. "Was it that Blinky?"

"Yes, it was," replied Carrington coldly.

"The fool! I heard he married one of Red Cloud's squaws, so I reckon he sold out to the Sioux."

Firing broke out once more, and loud shouts. "Hold these men here, Sergeant," ordered Carrington. "I'll question them later." He swung on his heel, and with the Rio Kid, returned to the fight.

Cool, brave as a lion, Carrington directed the struggle. The gray dawn came, and the aroused garrison, the pall of the Fetterman massacre hanging over them, watched and waited for the end.

CHAPTER VI

The Gold Strike

GLOOM settled over the garrison of Fort Phil Kearney. Even without the Sioux, it would have taken a man several days to reach Fort Laramie and none could say whether Portugee Phillips had made it or not. Since it had become known there were traitors inside the fort, men were uneasy, not certain who they could trust. Carrington doubled his guards. He kept his chin up, smiling easily, but holding them all in his steel grip.

The Rio Kid celebrated Christmas Day with Dave Harrison's party. Although the Sioux, with the massacre fresh in mind, continued to harass the fort, it was necessary to maintain morale. Carrington broke out extra rations, and there were small presents for the children who had come into the wilderness with their parents.

Dora Newton had been befriended by Emma Harrison, Dave's capable, cheerful wife. Now, stricken by loss of her fiancé, the girl spent most of her time with the older woman.

In a corner of the big common eating-room, Harrison's party, Frank Higsbee, the Kennys, Ban Young, George Brown, and several more, with their women and offspring ate their Christmas dinner, seeking to make it as merry as possible. Dora sat with Emma Harrison, and the Rio Kid sat between Weber and Celestino Mireles. The pot-bellied stoves glowed as the wind howled outside.

The Rio Kid watched the pale, composed, beautiful face of Dora Newton. She kept her grief well concealed.

"She's plumb pretty," he mused. "But Jack Smythe would have made her miserable. He was like me—too wild to turn into a good husband."

"I hope that gold field pans out for 'em," he thought. "They deserve it."

He didn't dwell in his mind on what would happen if Portugee Phillips failed to reach Laramie. Evidently Red Cloud guessed that the fort was running very short of ammunition.

He was still musing about this when young Weber nudged his arm.

"Isn't she a wonder, Rio Kid?" whispered Weber.

Brought back to the present, the scout turned and saw his companion looking at Dora, with a glow in his eyes.

"She's shore a nice gal, Van," replied the Rio Kid.

Weber was steady. He had a comforting air about him, and a woman could certainly depend on him.

"She used to teach school, back East," went on Weber. "I never went to school much myself. I begun workin' when I was twelve."

"A man's what he makes of himself, Van. Yuh're young. If that gold field proves up, yuh'll be rich and powerful."

A few days later, Carrington spoke to the Rio Kid.

"Check up how much ammunition the civilians in the fort have left, Rio Kid."

Pryor stared into the commander's eyes, and Carrington nodded. "We've only enough left for one big fight, Rio Kid. Red Cloud knows it, somehow."

There seemed no let-up in the strain of the siege. The days joined the nights in one long fight.

One afternoon Red Cloud and two thousand warriors, shrieking and shooting, attacked in full force. Blazing brands were hurled at the wooden palisades and roofs by hurtling, mounted warriors.

"Here comes our finish," thought Bob Pryor.

JOHN "PORTUGEE" PHILLIPS

ON THE terrible December night in 1866 after the Fetterman massacre, Fort Phil Kearney, Wyoming, was in serious danger, undermanned, in dire need of succor.

A blizzard began, the thermometer falling to thirty below. Men had their hands and feet frozen in shoveling snow and could only work out for half an hour or so at a time.

Colonel Carrington asked for a volunteer to ride to Fort Laramie for aid.

It was John Phillips, nicknamed "Portugee" because of his swarthy complexion, who stepped forward. He was a civilian scout for Carrington. Nobody else thought it remotely possible that anyone could get through the two hundred thirty-six miles to Laramie.

There has never been a more daring feat than Portugee's Ride. The Marathon was a cinch compared to it. The Indians were bad enough, swarming near the Fort, but the below zero weather and snow added to them made it almost ridiculous to think of.

The C. O. gave Phillips his own saddle horse, a Kentucky thoroughbred. Portugee took a few hardtack biscuits and some oats along and walked for a time in the night. Somehow he made the trip without getting off the track. His hands and feet were frostbitten by the third night. It was Christmas Eve when he reached Laramie. He staggered into an officers' dance, told his story and fainted, a strange form in his snowy buffalo coat and frozen beard.

It might be said Portugee was stronger than a horse because Carrington's charger died that night, while Portugee lived to tell the tale.

His black beard was pointed and narrow, his eyes slightly dangerous. He had a quarrelsome reputation, but his great ride squared him for all time.

A grateful government gave him three hundred dollars for his scouting services, plus the ride, and after his death, in 1883, his wife was presented with five thousand dollars.

The Sioux never forgave Phillips. Six years after the famous ride they killed all his cattle and ruined him.

He was up on a corner bastion, a vantage point from which to pick off the speeding riders. Mireles crouched near him, and Van Weber had the other corner. Guns from the fort barked in the crisp winter air.

The Rio Kid glanced back. Carrington was out, directing the battle. Red Cloud was pushing in, his braves well-armed, determined. Every shot from the fort meant one less bullet in the diminishing arsenal. When they were all gone, it would be death for the trapped men and women.

The Rio Kid joined Carrington. He knew Carrington's problems, for the colonel trusted him fully.

"About an hour more to go, Rio Kid." In Carrington's eyes was the knowledge of what would happen when the Sioux broke in the gates.

Without apparent reason, the firing

outside slackened. The Rio Kid and the officer climbed up to look across the high stockade.

"They're pullin' out, Colonel," exclaimed the Rio Kid.

He stared south, where the Bozeman Trail wound toward Laramie.

SIOUX horsemen were veering from the Bozeman Trail. Gunfire sounded over the rise.

"There they come!" roared the Rio Kid. "Help's here from Laramie!"

U. S. Cavalry, the advance guard of a relief expedition, topped the rise, beating back the Sioux. Bugles sounded faintly.

Portugee Phillips was with the rescuers. The Rio Kid hurried out to greet the relieving forces. He thumped his fellow scout on the back. Portugee grinned at him and squirted brown tobacco juice in the snow.

"Made it in three days, Rio Kid. The colonel's charger dropped daid a hunderd yards from the Fort Laramie gate. . . ."

When the winter broke, Red Cloud and the Sioux under him moved eastward toward the plains, to hunt the returning buffalo. Only small bands of raiders remained to harass Fort Phil Kearney, reinforced from Laramie with men and ammunition.

With Carrington's approval, the Rio Kid made ready to lead Van Weber and the Harrison party into the hills after gold.

Other parties had moved on to Montana, but Harrison and his friends meant to stay in Wyoming. Dora Newton had not yet returned East. Following the relief of the garrison, she had started a school for the children at the fort.

One bright morning, the ground just beginning to thaw, and snow still covering the hillsides, the Rio Kid rode Saber from the fort's gates. Following him came Dave Harrison, Frank Higsbee, the Kennys, Van Weber, and other miners. A gold strike would attract white settlers and assist Carrington in overcoming the Sioux, although, when the buffalo hunting season was over, there was little doubt that Red Cloud and his main army would be back to harry Fort Phil Kearney.

Close behind the Rio Kid, rode Celestino Mireles. The underfooting was bad, but they made fair speed. Turning now and then, the men gazed backward at the fort, where their loved ones were watching.

"This is mighty beautiful country, Rio Kid!" cried Dave Harrison. The sturdy leader of the gold hunters drank in deep drafts of the clean, pine-laden air.

Intense hope was in every heart as they moved toward the shapes of the low hills where the Rio Kid's gold reposed. They camped, using canvas shelters, for the night. In the morning, they continued the trip, reaching a swift flowing creek, tributary of the Powder River, where Pryor had seen traces of gold.

Sharp ridges, with forests of spruce and pine, closed in the long valley. The stream wound eastward through the mountains. Game abounded here, antelope and bear and smaller animals. The Rio Kid chose a large flat, close to the river, which edged back into the hills, and camp was set up.

"Here we go, boys—and may ev'ry man make his fortune," said Dave Harrison.

Two days later, Van Weber dug a huge, pure gold nugget from the section of creek bank which he had staked off. It sent an electric shock through the men who gathered to stare at the magic metal. Dave Harrison, and young Ed Garvey, also began to wash out good amounts of placer gold. Garvey's claim, the last on the south bank of Snake Creek to the west, seemed especially promising. But soon Weber's eclipsed it. Weber's section adjoined the one of Garvey.

FOR two miles up and down the creek, they had staked out mining sections. When night fell, they all returned to the little settlement of tent and crude shacks, which the Rio Kid had christened "Carrington" in honor of his friend.

"We'll see that these claims're recorded legal-like, boys," the Rio Kid told them, one evening soon after Weber had discovered his nugget. "A find like Van's may leak out and we don't want claim-jumpers on our necks. I'll run back to the fort and see to it. The colonel will help us out."

"Now we savvy we're stayin' here," said Harrison, "I vote we bring out our women from the fort. We can fix up the shacks in a jiffy. I miss Emma, and I know she'd like to be with me."

The Rio Kid, Celestino, Weber and half a dozen younger men, rode back to

Fort Kearney, with news of the strike, taking along nuggets to prove it. Dave Harrison and the rest remained at Carrington to put the finishing touches on the shelters.

Pryor found the fort quiet. The early spring day was warm. The sting gone from the air. Snow melting. Inside the compound, Van Weber eagerly looked around for Dora Newton. She came to the door of the school, and smiled at him.

"Miss Dora—look at this!" Weber put the big nugget into her hands.

"Gold! It's gold, isn't it?" She was surprised at its weight.

Soldiers, traders, all within hearing, gathered about them. News of the strike spread like wildfire, and the Rio Kid moved toward Colonel Carrington's quarters to report. Carrington shook hands, listening to the story.

"Good work, Rio Kid. A few settlements will force the Government to strengthen the fort. Red Cloud will be back when the buffalo hunting is done."

In the meantime Flash Davis watched the crowd outside his window, and noted the gold displayed by Van Weber and the returning prospectors.

"They've struck it, Cud," he growled.

His deal with Red Cloud had fallen through. The Sioux had not yet raised the large amount needed to purchase the rifles which Davis had for sale. He had made a trip back to his hidden storehouse to report, and returned to Fort Phil Kearney to bide his time.

Flash Davis watched jealously as Dora Newton smiled upon Weber. The beauty of the young woman had attracted him, and he had learned that she had some money of her own. The sight of the gold excited him, and the fever of it took hold of his imagination.

"I'm going to get in on that new field, Cud. Those fools don't deserve to be rich."

"How?" asked Murphy, who was also watching eagerly. "They've staked the best spots."

Davis shrugged. "What of it? Only the man with the brains makes the profits from such strikes. That cussed Rio Kid and Carrington figure it'll strengthen their hand against the Sioux. And it would, too, if too many gold-hunters come in. The longer the Indians fight and keep strong, the longer our market holds."

"That Rio Kid's a rip-roarin' fightin' man," said Murphy, licking his ugly lip. "I'd hate to tangle with him. He near had Horrigan's scalp, only they couldn't prove nothin'."

"I'll take care of the Rio Kid, and Carrington, too, when the time comes," declared Davis. "In the meantime, I'll see about control over that new strike. It looks big."

"How yuh goin' to work it?"

"I must talk with Art Horrigan. I can use him on this. Where can I find him?"

"He's livin' in a dugout, near Quirly Creek. He holed up thar, after Carrington run him out of the fort. You aimin' to see him?"

Davis nodded. "I'll pay him a visit. It ought to be easy enough to flimflam those prospectors."

CHAPTER VII

Blackguard's Progress

DORA NEWTON had surprising news for Van Weber when next he saw her.

"Van," said Dora Newton, "I'm going back to Snake Creek with the Harrisons!"

"You — you mean that?" Delight flooded Weber's young heart. It quickly changed to anxiety. "It's mighty rough livin', for a lady like you."

She smiled. "I like the widerness, Van. It's beautiful, and it's more exciting than anything I ever imagined. I'm going to teach school for them at Carrington, and I hope to buy a share in one of the new gold claims."

"That's great, Miss Dora."

Weber was astonished that an Eastern girl, brought up in comfortable civilized surroundings, should chose to cast her life in a rough mining camp.

A large party returned to Snake Creek, wagons filled with supplies and household goods, the women and children riding on the seats or on spare mounts. Men who had been at the fort, ready to go on to Montana, joined the caravan for the run to the Rio Kid's strike.

To Weber's surprise, Flash Davis drove in a light buckboard with the Snake Creek party. Weber grew un-

pleasantly aware of Davis. He could see the smooth, quick-tongued fellow was interested in Dora Newton, during the trip. Davis was smiling and cordial to the pretty woman. His manners had mended when she was near. His man, Cud Murphy, brought up at the rear, driving a wagon filled with supplies.

Two days' journey brought them to Carrington. Dave Harrison seized Emma in his arms, kissing her happily. His son greeted her affectionately, also. Dora Newton planned to live with the Harrisons. Those left at the creek had built up the shelters. The weather was moderating, and with log fires and warm clothing, they were not uncomfortable.

The new arrivals unpacked and shook down quickly. The men went back to their placer mining up and down the creek, and those who had come late hunted for promising spots at a distance from the settlement. Harrison and his friends had won the nearest claims and what seemed to be the best ones.

Van Weber worked with a mad speed. Ambition consumed him. It wasn't gold that he wanted so much as the power to win Dora. Secretly, the young fellow had determined to marry her.

One evening he returned to the little shack on the outskirts of Carrington, where he slept, cleaned up quickly, and hurried up the slope toward Dave Harrison's camp.

He had a habit of moving silently. When he came near the Harrisons' he heard voices, and paused, staring through the trees. Harrison's cabin was lighted. A wood fire glowed in the stone hearth. Against this glow, Weber saw Flash Davis and Dora Newton.

"Dora, I love you!" Davis was saying. "I've loved you from the moment I first saw you. Will you marry me?"

Van Weber's heart dropped. He envied Davis the ability to speak in such cultured tones. Davis took Dora in his arms, bending to kiss her lips.

Weber was turning away, cursing fate, all interest in life gone, when he heard Dora speak sharply:

"Let me go, please! I don't want to kiss you!"

Davis let go of her. More gently, for she hated to hurt anyone, the young woman went on, "I'm sorry, but I don't love you. I could never marry you."

Weber sighed inwardly. He felt almost sorry for the luckless Davis, as Flash tried to plead his cause. Dora remained adamant, and after a time, the disappointed suitor left her. He passed Weber, but the young man had faded back into the shadows. . . .

A WEEK later Flash Davis was sitting in Horrigan's tent, at the new mining settlement of Carrington, fingering a glass of whiskey. At Davis' instructions, Art Horrigan had imported a number of Frontier outlaws and brought them down to Snake Creek. Here they had set up camp above Ed Garvey's claim, the last on the stream belonging to the Rio Kid's special friends.

"Weber's doin' well, Art, and so is Harrison and others," said Davis. "This is a genuine strike. Garvey picked out a four-hundred-dollar nugget.

Horrigan nodded. "I heard about it, Flash."

"Garvey has no family with him. He lives alone in a tent near his claim."

Horrigan took a swig from his own bottle.

"Yuh seem kind of down in the mouth, Flash," he said. "What happened? Did that purty gal what teaches the school, throw yuh down?"

Davis frowned. "Yes. I think she's stuck on Weber."

He was smarting with injured ego, and his hate for the innocent settlers had increased. "How many men you got now?"

"Fifteen. There's allus guns for hire, though."

"Send for more. I'll fianance you. I'm going to take Carrington and all its gold claims, Art. And kill Weber and the Rio Kid as soon as possible."

"Shore, Boss."

They drank on it. Then Davis outlined the plans.

The Rio Kid pulled into Carrington mining camp around noon. He had made a hasty trip back to Fort Phil Kearney on business.

Dave Harrison was not working at his claim; he came forward to greet the Rio Kid.

"Did you see anything of Ed Garvey on the trail to the fort?" he asked.

"No. Ain't he at his claim?"

Harrison shook his head. "Nobody's seen him for two days. His bag and horse are gone. He must've run off, but it's queer."

RED CLOUD

RED CLOUD, Chief of the Oglala Sioux, was born on the Platte River, Nebraska. He was a redoubtable chief and a sworn enemy of the whites.

In Wyoming, December 21, 1866, two thousand Sioux warriors under Red Cloud, who had been keeping the little outpost of Fort Phil Kearney practically under siege, since it had been built to help defend the Bozeman Trail to the Montana gold fields, caught Captain William J. Fetterman and eighty men, the wood detail, outside the Fort, and killed them all.

Van Weber appeared, coming down the creek path. He greeted his friends.

"Art Horrigan and his pards just took over Garvey's place. I come to tell yuh. Those fellers with Horrigan are plenty tough. They told me to mind my own bus'ness."

The Rio Kid frowned. For a moment he had been thinking that Garvey, having been lucky in finding gold, might have hit the trail for the bright lights of Cheyenne or some other wild town, to celebrate.

"Horrigan!" he growled. "I might've knowed there'd be trouble with him around."

Horrigan had wriggled out of the suspicious spot he had been in at Fort Kearney. Nothing had been proved against him, for the trader and his men had denied everything, blaming it all on the deceased Blinky. Finally, Carrington had released him. But, thought the Rio Kid, a bad penny always turns up.

"I'll go up and talk to 'em," said the Rio Kid. "Come on, Celestino."

The Mexican silently checked his carbine and fancy six-shooters. Weber and Harrison were armed, and Harrison called several more of his friends, following the Rio Kid up the trail toward Garvey's.

Art Horrigan sat on a stump at the front of the tent. Around him a dozen armed men. They eyed the advancing miners, without speaking.

"'Afternoon, Horrigan," said the Rio Kid.

"Howdy, Rio Kid," drawled Horrigan. "Nice to see yuh."

THERE was a duel of eyes, as the Rio Kid stared into the deep-set eyes of the Indian trader.

"Waitin' here for Garvey?" inquired Pryor, his teeth showing.

"Huh? Why, no. Garvey's left. We have moved in here to be near our new claim."

"This is Ed Garvey's claim."

"Not now it ain't. He sold out to me last night, before he left for the settle-

ments. Got sick of the grind and decided to sashay. Look here if yuh don't believe me."

Horrigan whipped out a paper and handed it to the Rio Kid, who glanced at it curiously. It read:

For consideration rec'd, I hereby sell my claim, No. 56 on Snake Crik, to A. Horrigan.

"Looks like Ed's writing," growled Dave Harrison, craning his neck to see over Pryor's shoulder. "You certain of this, Horrigan?"

Horrigan flushed, and spat.

"You old goat!" he growled. "Are yuh callin' me a liar?"

"Keep a civil tongue in yore haid, Horrigan," warned the Rio Kid. "I don't like the way yuh smell at all, not here any more'n I did at the fort!"

Because Horrigan's men outnumbered the prospectors, he ventured to curse and scowl at the Rio Kid. Then he struck at Pryor's face. The Rio Kid took the blow lightly on the cheek, and promptly hit back. His hard smack to the nose sent Horrigan staggering back.

Horrigan's outlaws grew tense, ready for the fight, but Horrigan, with tears coming to his eyes from his injured nose, did not try to draw. He knew that the Rio Kid could kill him before he could clear leather. He had no desire to be the first to fall.

"After this, when I ask yuh a question, make yore answer straight and polite, savvy?" snapped the Rio Kid. "And keep yore pack of coyotes in hand. Hear me?"

"I hear yuh," growled Horrigan, his eyes flickering.

Dave Harrison chuckled. Horrigan was crawling, fearful of the Rio Kid.

"Garvey shore did sell his claim, like I told yuh," went on Horrigan sullenly. "What do yuh want me to do? Go after him and fetch him back to prove it?"

The Rio Kid paused. Perhaps Horrigan was telling the truth. Since the man wouldn't put up a fight, Pryor could not shoot him down. The scout swung on his spurred heels, and, followed by his friends, moved off.

"Queer, that Garvey'd run off thataway," grunted Harrison, as they made their way back to the settlement.

"Fishy," snapped the Rio Kid. "Didn't you folks have an understandin' that none would sell his claim without tellin' the rest?"

"That's right. We promised to stick together."

During the next few days, Horrigan's place became a nuisance. Garvey's former camp was enlarged into a saloon, and a large contingent of toughs arrived, with some women, imported—evidently—all the way from Cheyenne. After dark, the spot was noisy. Questionable characters from the Bozeman Trail were diverted to Snake Creek, attracted like flies to rotting matter.

AT FIRST the Carrington miners were too busy digging gold to pay attention. They were the sort who minded their own business.

The Rio Kid, at the gold camp, had an innate warning of danger hanging over the little settlement he had sponsored. He liked Dave Harrison and his friends. For the sake of Colonel Carrington and the fort, he was interested in the success of the venture.

He was well aware of Flash Davis' presence. He wondered why such a fastidious man had chosen to live in such a place, for Davis mined no gold.

On a bright morning the Rio Kid, his sixth sense heavily warning him, left the settlement and walked up the trail toward Van Weber's claim. Men were working near the water. Pryor took a deer trail that cut across the neck of land where the stream curved, a short-cut to Weber's workings. Through thick woods, he moved down a rocky slope, and as the trees thinned, saw Weber's rocker and tools on the muddy bank of the roiled creek.

Getting closer, a bullet whizzed past his head and slapped into the tree trunk a yard behind him.

"Rifle slug!" he thought, ducking quickly.

It had come from across the creek, where thick willow clumps abounded. Pistol in hand, the Rio Kid peered around the right side of the big rock which gave him cover. He was concerned about Weber who was not in sight.

. Next Issue's Novel: LORD OF THE SILVER LODE .

CHAPTER VIII

Ambushers

POKING the pistol out from the rock, the Rio Kid threw slugs into the willows but drew no reply. Gun in hand, he rose and ran to some boulders rising near the bank of the creek, a few yards from Van Weber's rocker, a trough-like affair used in washing gold from gravel.

As he craned his neck, he suddenly sighted Weber's boots sticking from the grass at the water's edge.

"Van!" he called, but there was no reply.

The Rio Kid, risking a slug, jumped over and pulled Van Weber up on the bank. Weber's face had been partially immersed in the cold water. He draped his friend over a round boulder, to drain out some of the liquid, and found Weber was holding a six-shooter in a vice-like grip. The weapon had been fired three times, showing he had fought for his life. A bullet had pierced his body near the shoulder while another had struck his skull. The hair was crusted with blood.

"He got the body wound right off," decided the Rio Kid. "Afterwards, when he was shootin' it out, they got him in the haid."

At first Pryor thought the deed had been committed by a small party of marauding Sioux. No more shots came from the willows. So he covered Weber with a piece of canvas he found nearby, crossed Snake Creek and hunted among the willow brakes. He soon found the spot where the ambushers had been hidden. The clear imprint of a hobnailed boot heel met his eye.

"White men," grunted the Rio Kid. He took a minute to check the out-trail. It was soon lost in the water, skillfully concealed.

Van Weber now claimed his attention once more. Returning, he found the young man's horse picketed in the woods, and loaded on the body. Then he mounted behind.

Celestino Mireles, who liked to be comfortable and warm when he could, had built a little shack on the ridge above Carrington. The Rio Kid carried out a plan he had conceived. Avoiding the other miners, he took a short-cut to the shack, where he found the Mexican warming himself in front of the fireplace.

"Dig a grave, Celestino," ordered the Rio Kid. "Bushwhackers have shot Weber!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" The Mexican's eyes rolled in shocked horror. He was probably deeply affected.

The Rio Kid was in a hurry. He soon left his shack, and rode on Weber's horse to the settlement, where a large chunk of iron hung from a rope at the center of the town, and banged on it. It was the Indian alarm, and used to call the miners in.

Dave Harrison came hustling up from his claim, followed by Frank Higsbee, the Kenny brothers and all the rest. They had their guns in hand, ready for trouble. The women and children, ceasing work or play, gathered to hear the Rio Kid.

"Van Weber's dead, folks," growled the Rio Kid, as they listened. "He was murdered while workin' his claim."

A woman gave a sudden, sharp cry. Mrs. Harrison caught Dora Newton around the waist, steadying her. The girl was stricken. All the color left her pretty face and her eyes were wide with horrified grief.

"I hate to do this," thought the Rio Kid. "But it must be done."

He surveyed the circle of anxious faces. Flash Davis and Cud Murphy had come from their cabin up the line at the alarm, and stood among the prospectors and their families.

"How did it happen?" demanded Davis.

"Killers dropped him from the woods acrost the creek," answered the Rio Kid. "He put up a fight until they got him in the haid."

"I—I can hardly believe it!" gasped Harrison.

Weber had been a universal favorite among the miners and his death saddened them. To Dora Newton it was evidently a worse blow than to anyone else. Soon Emma Harrison led the weeping girl back to her cabin.

"You pay high for gold, don't you," growled Harrison, his bearded lips grim.

There was more than gold to it for the Rio Kid. This incident, the pro-

ject to build up Wyoming. Gold was being taken out of Snake Creek, plenty of it, and more and more prospectors were drifting in. So far the Rio Kid had been successful in protecting Harrison and his friends. This was empire building, and the Rio Kid understood its significance.

"I'll bet I know who killed him!" snarled the giant, Frank Higsbee, clenching his huge fists.

The Rio Kid shrugged. "Guessin' ain't savvyin', Frank. I didn't see 'em do it, and none but Weber could say who they were."

"Where's the body?" inquired Dave Harrison.

"Mireles and I planted him on the trail near my shack. There's stones on top of the grave now."

"Shucks! You should have let us give him a decent funeral, Rio Kid. The boy certainly deserved it."

"Too many coyotes and buzzards around to let a man lie. There's nothin' to stop yuh from havin' a funeral now, if yuh want."

"We'll do it this afternoon."

The Rio Kid slipped away. He crossed Snake Creek and resumed his hunt among the willow brakes and brush where the killers had been hidden. He found some sign, but after leaving the vicinity of the ambush, the renegades had taken pains to cover their trail. After losing the footprints in the water, he was unable to pick them up again.

Later he attended the funeral for Van Weber. The next morning, he saddled up the dun, after saying good-by to his friends at Carrington.

"I got important bus'ness at the fort, folks. I'll be back in a week or two, though. Take care of yoreselves."

He splashed across the ford, waving to them as they made ready to go to work.

But late the following afternoon, he returned to Carrington. Harrison, sweated and tired from a long day's work at his claim, was surprised to see him ride silently out from the trees.

"Thought you were at the fort by this time, Rio Kid," cried the miner.

"I came back, Dave," said the scout riding up close to his friend. "Forgot something." He sat on Saber, staring keenly down into the honest miner's face. "Has somebody grabbed Weber's claim?"

Harrison's astonishment increased. "How'd you know that? A bunch of strangers snatched the claim this mornin'. They say Weber sold out before he was killed."

"I guessed it would happen." The Rio Kid tried to conceal his grim elation. *"Bueno!"*

"We didn't know what to do about it," explained Harrison. "Resembles Ed Garvey's case—crooked—but we don't want to go off half-cocked. We thought we'd wait and talk things over with you. It's strange Weber would sell to a blackguard like Gig Anson."

"Gig Anson? I don't know him. He's got a bunch of scalawags with him, I reckon?"

"That's right. Anson's their boss. He hails from Cheyenne."

"I see," said the Rio Kid. "I need a few of you boys to back me up while I palaver with this Anson."

"You'll get the backing. I'm glad you come back. Wait—I'll get 'em."

The Rio Kid picked Harrison, the Kenny's, Frank Higsbee, George Brown and several others to assist him. Together they rode swiftly to Weber's claim, arriving as sunset reddened the Rockies.

"That's Gig Anson, the husky one with the spade beard," Harrison told Pryor, as they dismounted.

Gig Anson was a burly fellow, with quick, green-hued eyes. His pointed whiskers were brown like his curly hair, and his thick legs were cased in black whipcord breeches tucked into high boots. A felt hat was cocked jauntily on his big head. He had a dozen men with him. They had watched the approach of the Carrington miners, alert and ready for trouble.

"Howdy," grunted Anson, facing the Rio Kid.

ANSON'S companions wore Colts. Their carbines were lying close at hand.

"Yuh're Gig Anson?" began the Rio Kid.

"That's me," drawled the leader.

"I'm the Rio Kid. Van Weber was a pard of mine. I understand yuh bought his claim before he died."

"Yuh understand fine," replied Anson defiantly.

"Let's see the quit-claim deed."

COLONEL HENRY BEEBEE CARRINGTON

BORN in Wallingford, Connecticut, on March 2, 1824, Henry Beebee Carrington was a grandson of James Carrington, partner of Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin.

From early youth he was interested in military affairs, and he taught at Irving Institute, Tarrytown, N. Y. One of his first books was "Battles of the American Revolution." He was later professor at New Haven College, and in 1848 moved to Columbus, Ohio, where he took up the practice of law. Here he remained nine years.

Governor Salmon Chase was his friend, and for the Governor, Carrington reorganized the State Militia in 1857. He did so well that he was appointed adjutant-general, and when the Civil War broke, Carrington speeded nine regiments of Ohio militia across the Ohio River to save West Virginia for the Union.

He was given command, as Colonel, of the 18th U. S. Infantry, and received the thanks of General Winfield Scott for his fine work, and was promoted to brigadier-general in 1862. He was a genius as an organizer and despatcher of troops. From Indiana alone he sent one hundred thousand men into the Union forces.

He also did some espionage work, exposing the notorious "Sons of Liberty," and other disloyal orders.

Mustered out, he rejoined his regiment. He helped catch the guerrillas of Missouri, and then was sent to Nebraska.

In the Rockies, Carrington did a splendid job in building Fort Phil Kearney. Entirely blameless in the massacre, he was yet crucified for it. Despite this, he took the blame like a real soldier. In 1867 he negotiated the Treaty of Spotted Trail. Then, on account of a serious wound which he had received, he was forced to take a year's leave.

His troops helped to protect the Union Pacific builders. In 1869, he took the post of Professor of Military Science at Wabash College. He negotiated several Indian treaties, and wrote many books, among them "American Classics," "Russia Among the Nations," "Hints to Soldiers Taking the Field," and others, besides numerous articles and stories.

He was twice married and lived to a ripe old age, a fine soldier, student and man, dying in October, 1912.

The men with Anson had faces new to the Rio Kid but they were of a type with which he was familiar. Frontier toughs. Art Horrigan had imported them just for this job. Ready for trouble, therefore, the Rio Kid watched closely as Anson produced legal papers and handed them over. "All in apple-pie order, I'll bet," said the Rio Kid, as he pocketed the documents.

"Hey, what's the idee?" demanded Anson truculently. "Gimme back them papers."

"If yuh still want 'em after I'm

through, I'll jam 'em down yore craw, Anson." A metallic hardness had come into the Rio Kid's drawl. His eyes glinted.

Gig Anson's outlaw friends grew tense.

"What's the meanin' of this?" their leader blustered. He was held by the Rio Kid's eyes.

The shadows were lengthening. Night would soon blanket the wilderness. The running of the creek seemed preternaturally loud while the Rio Kid was confronting Anson and his toughs. At last Bob Pryor broke the silence.

"Saddle yore horse and come with me, Anson."

"Why should I?" snarled the man.

"They need yuh at the fort. Colonel Carrington will say somethin' that'll interest yuh."

The fort! Grayness touched Gig Anson's bearded face. He knew what that meant. The Rio Kid's reputation was known on the Frontier.

"Yuh—yuh got no right to arrest me," Anson gulped. "I bought this claim legal-

Anson, who was holding his punctured wrist. "Now get yore horse and come along."

"I—I can't. My arm's busted," whined Anson, tears in his green eyes.

"Saddle up, I said!"

Anson turned and hurriedly picked up his saddle with his left hand. Near at hand were the horses of the renegades. The bearded man put his hull on a gray gelding and tightened the cinches, somehow, with his uninjured hand. Calling Frank Higsbee and Lew Kenny and leaving the others with Harrison to guard the prisoners, the Rio Kid mounted Saber and rode off up the trail to his shack on the ridge, behind Anson.

HIGSBEE, Kenny and the Rio Kid had no trouble keeping Gig Anson in line. While they were on their way up, the night fell with characteristic suddenness. They pressed up the path. The Rio Kid had never intended to take Anson to the fort. Soon, ahead, they saw the little lighted windows of a rough moun-

Coming Next Issue: THE RAWHIDE KID, a Story by Hapsburg Liebe

like from Weber. Yuh're actin' like a bandit!"

"No, I ain't a bandit. Saddle up."

Gig Anson gave a shrill cry and his hand flashed to his six-gun.

At that same instant Anson's cursing men grabbed for their own weapons. Their leader had showed the way.

But the Rio Kid's Colt was out and booming before Gig Anson could get his gun into action. The slug pierced Anson's forearm. The bearded man screamed in pain, as his arm dropped and his heavy weapon slipped from his useless fingers. Dave Harrison drilled a wolfish-faced fellow who was trying to shoot the Rio Kid from behind. Simultaneously Ban Young received a creased cheek, but his reply downed his attacker.

Bob Pryor swung about with a battle shout. On the creek bank, the guns thundered, echoing along the valley. The Rio Kid's fire was accurate. He blasted the line of snarling outlaws until they suddenly quit, flinging down their six-shooters and calling for mercy.

"Herd 'em together and drive 'em into the woods," ordered the Rio Kid, speaking to Dave Harrison. He turned to Gig

tain shack. Celestino Mireles hailed them from the door.

"All right, Celestino," sang out the Rio Kid.

His Mexican partner stood there, carbine in his brown hands. He grinned at the Rio Kid. Pryor shoved Gig Anson into the single-roomed cabin, and the man's green eyes blinked in the candle light. Higsbee and Lew Kenny blocked the door.

"Take away the branches, Celestino," commanded the Rio Kid.

The Mexican pulled aside a balsam screen. In a bunk against the wall lay Van Weber. There was a thick bandage around his head, and he was lying on one side, with another dressed wound showing in his right shoulder. He was pale and in pain, but he was alive.

"Jumpin' catamounts!" gasped Higsbee, his jaw dropping. "Why, Van, we buried yuh the other day!"

"Yuh had a funeral, that's all," grinned the Rio Kid. "I figgered I might snaffle those claim-jumpers if they thought Weber was daid, so I hid him here and lied. He's hurt but he can tell yuh he never sold his claim to Gig Anson."

CHAPTER IX

Honkytonk

FOR a long time the surprised miners stared at the bandaged young miner on the bunk. Then the wounded man spoke in faint tones.

"That's the truth," muttered Van Weber. "I—was shot while I was workin'. I didn't sell—my claim."

"Never seen these, did you, Van?" asked the Rio Kid, showing Weber the receipt and forged deed.

"No, never!"

Gig Anson was trembling with fear. The wound in the arm had shattered his nerve. Confronted by Weber, whom he had believed dead, the bearded claim-jumper could not find his voice. His teeth chattered and his eyes were like saucers as he stared, first at the Rio Kid and then at Weber.

Frank Higsbee started toward Anson, and Lew Kenny followed.

"Let's string the polecat up on the nearest tree," growled Higsbee. "He shore deserves it."

Seizing Anson by the throat in his powerful hands, he tightened his grasp. Anson choked, helpless in Higsbee's grip. The eyes of the killer bulged and he would have sunk down, had not Higsbee held him up, clear of the dirt.

"That's enough for now, Frank," ordered the Rio Kid. "Put him down."

Higsbee opened his hands and Anson fell in a heap, gasping. The Rio Kid stood over the captive.

"Yuh shot Ed Garvey, too, didn't yuh, Anson?" he demanded.

"No—no, so help me, I didn't! I never killed anybody around here. My job wasn't to shoot Garvey, or Weber, either. I only done what Horrigan told me."

"Art Horrigan's the play, huh? That's what I figgered, but I wanted to be shore." The Rio Kid's suspicions were confirmed.

"Horrigan shot Garvey hisself," chattered Anson. Now he was talking, he told everything. "They buried the body in the woods and run off Garvey's hoss. Art hired me to take over Weber's claim for him."

"So! Horrigan's got ambitions, ain't he?"

"He means to take the hull crik."

"That sidewinder would have picked us all off, one by one," growled Higsbee. "What next, Rio Kid?"

"Next," replied Pryor, "comes this!" He patted his Colt. "Lew, Frank and you ride down and fetch every fightin' man in our bunch. I'll meet yuh on the trail inside of an hour."

A halloa from the trail sent the Rio Kid to the open door. Then his face broke into smiles as he recognized the rider who came into the circle of light. "Portugee! What you doin' here?"

"Colonel Carrington sent me. He wanted to make shore ev'rything was all right. We expected yuh back before this."

"I got delayed."

The buckskin-clad Portugee Phillips slid off his mustang to shake hands with his friend, the Rio Kid. The Frontiersman who had made the famous ride which had saved Fort Kearney, slouched into the cabin. His dark skin and eyes gleamed in the light as his friends greeted him.

"Red Cloud's pesterin' the Bozeman Trail ag'in," said Portugee. "They killed a teamster the other day, and not a party passes through they don't take shots at. But the main bunch're huntin' buffalo eastward." As he spoke his eyes had been taking in the plight of the cowering prisoner, but he made no comment.

"That red devil'll be back," growled the Rio Kid. "Red Cloud'll never give up till he's daid or Fort Kearney is burnt down."

Portugee nodded. He continued to stare at the cowering Gig Anson, and the Rio Kid quickly explained.

"If you're goin' on a coyote hunt, count me in," answered Phillips. "That is, if it ain't private."

"Come on. We're startin' pronto."

HIGSBEE and Lew Kenny went ahead of them, to call out the men of Carrington. The Rio Kid checked his guns and refilled the loops of his cartridge belt. Then with Portugee, he rode down the slope, after his friends. Gig Anson was left under the vigilant Mexican's eye.

Frank Higsbee came up the main path by the creek, leading the fighting men of

Carrington. Not far off they picked up Dave Harrison and the party which had gone to Weber's claim with the Rio Kid. Trussing up the outlaws they had captured and dumping them in the woods, they headed along the stream toward Art Horrigan's place. It consisted of a pretentious shed which had been carted in from Cheyenne and nailed together.

The armed party, led by the Rio Kid and Portugee, rapidly moved on the beaten trail.

"There she be," announced the Rio Kid, as they saw Horrigan's lights through the foliage. Sounds of music and loud voices reached them.

Horrigan had enlarged the stolen camp into a good-sized honkytonk. Drunken men were howling raucously, and there were female voices, too, shrill in the night, girls whom the erstwhile Indian trader had imported from Cheyenne to entertain his shady customers.

"Harrison," said the Rio Kid, "hold the boys off the trail, in the woods, till yuh get our signal. Portugee and I will scout the way."

Leaving their horses in the woods, the Rio Kid and Portugee started along the path through the trees. They made no sound, for they had both stalked Indians. A couple of hundred yards out from Horrigan's, the Rio Kid touched Portugee's arm and both froze.

"Sentry round the bend," breathed Pryor.

They could smell tobacco smoke. While they listened, they heard a low cough as a hidden man ahead cleared his throat. The Rio Kid began a slow stalk, inching forward, pausing at every advance. Close to the trail guard, the Rio Kid picked up a pebble and tossed it out on the path.

The sound attracted the attention of the sentry, and he grunted. The Rio Kid placed the man's position exactly when the fellow stuck out his head to see what was coming. The movement framed the sentry against the yellow glow of the saloon, near cabins and sheds where the outlaws lived.

Several minutes later, the two scouts hit him from the shadows, and he went down under their lithe bodies. His cry was stifled by powerful fingers at his throat and lips. After gagging and tying him, the two flitted through the woods to the honkytonk

"Watch it!" warned the Rio Kid, and they silently dropped flat on the dark ground.

Someone was coming hurriedly through the open woods toward Horrigan's squat collection of shacks and tents, which were huddled on the high ground over the floor mark of Snake Creek. He went into the honkytonk by the back door. The alert scouts drew closer.

Sounds of revelry were loud in their ears. Art Horrigan had equipped the place with a bar, mirrors, lamps and other fittings. Here the riffraff could relax. This disorder created lawlessness and helped his scheme of jumping Carrington's claims. Desperadoes were drawn to the mines and death threatened the decent settlers of Snake Creek.

Through a crude window, the Rio Kid peered in at a dingy, dirt-floored back room. A lamp smoked on a pine-slab table. Art Horrigan, the cadaverous-faced proprietor, was talking with the panting fellow who had run through the wood.

"Cud Murphy!" mused the Rio Kid, recognizing the ugly friend of Flash Davis.

"What's wrong, Cud?" Horrigan was saying.

HORRIGAN'S bony face was sweaty from the warmth. He wore fancy clothing, a carpet vest gay wtih colors, gray pants that fit snugly around his long legs, and a frock coat. A thick gold chain crossed his middle. He had been coining money, selling rotgut liquor, and running a bandit hideout.

Cud Murphy's face was crimson from the race he had made. Struggling for breath, he could hardly get out his words.

"Pronto, Art! Set yore men. The Rio Kid and a hull passel of 'em from Carrington are on their way to clean yuh out. The boss sent me to warn yuh."

"What started the rampage?" Horrigan licked his lips.

"That cussed Rio Kid trapped Gig Anson, and Gig caved in, I reckon. Weber ain't daid! And the Rio Kid only pretended to go to the fort. Hustle! They'll be here any minute now."

"I'm ready for that Rio Kid," boasted Horrigan brushing back the tail of his coat. A big revolver rode at his hip. He

paused to make sure there was a cartridge under the pin and that the weapon wouldn't drag when he drew. Then he extracted a nickel-plated derringer from his arm holster. After looking at it, he dropped it into the right-hand pocket of his coat. "Cuss the Rio Kid! I've had it in for him a long time now," he growled. "Tonight I'll cash his chips, Cud."

"Shore, I better get. The chief said I wasn't to stay here, Art."

"Right. I'll take care of them dumb miners," promised Horrigan.

Cud Murphy left the saloon.

"Let him go, Portugee," breathed the Rio Kid. "We'll see to him and his boss later."

Horrigan had decided to keep running his honkytonk full-blast. The proprietor made his preparations for trouble by hurrying to the door that led into the main saloon and signaling to one of his men. His squat, tough lieutenant, a man whom the Rio Kid knew as "Shorty," hurried up.

Horrigan drew Shorty into the side room. "There's a passel of gold grubbers on their way here from Carrington, Shorty, to bust us wide open. Yuh savvy the plan. Get yore men set. Loopholes are all cut in the partition. When they come in the front, yuh can open up on 'em."

"Shore. The boys'll feel tickled to down a few miners."

Shorty ran out to marshal his roughs. The Rio Kid, curious to see the trap which Horrigan had made ready for this contingency, waited. He saw Shorty return to the room. With him were a dozen ruffians. They carried rifles and shotguns, and manned loopholes which had been cut in a partition which cunningly commanded the barroom. These loopholes were cleverly concealed.

The Rio Kid found that Horrigan had additional ideas, too. Creeping along the wall of the honkytonk, in the shadows, the Rio Kid observed that Horrigan was placing more gunmen behind the long portable bar which ran along the south side of the main room.

The building was a hodgepodge of hastily erected walls. Oil lamps hung from chains, or stood in wall brackets. Tobacco smoke blued the air, and barrels of raw whiskey were set on little stands behind the crude bar. A drink cost a dollar. A dozen girls, brought from Cheyenne, were popular with the fifty or sixty roughs who frequented the place. A violin and squeaky accordion furnished music, and dancing went on spasmodically, although there weren't enough women to go around. Sometimes men danced together, their heavy boots shaking the earth.

THE Rio Kid signaled Portugee and they drew off to consult.

"I'll go in the front with ten men, Portugee. You take care of the sharpshooters in the back. Higsbee can smash the few behind the bar with a couple of men, cross-firin' from that side window."

"Sounds good. Come on."

They hurried back to Harrison, and the impatient Carrington party. Harrison and those who were to accompany the Rio Kid in the frontal assault inspected their guns. Portugee marshaled his crew, and Frank Higsbee was given his instructions.

"Make plenty rumpus when we hit the front, boys," advised the Rio Kid. "I'll lead. Follow me."

The Rio Kid and his party moved noisily up the path.

There was no porch on the honkytonk. The wide door was open. The Rio Kid stepped in, pausing at the threshold. The music was piping, "Little Brown Jug," and several couples were hopping around. Horrigan, so it would look right, had not warned the women of the danger.

Everything was set carefully for the reception of the Rio Kid. Horrigan and his claim-jumpers had killed Ed Garvey, and tried to murder Van Weber. Now they plotted to destroy the decent settlers on Snake Creek.

Art Horrigan, his cadaverous face set in a grin, was slouched artistically at the far end of the bar, his left hand showing as he leaned there. His right hung at his side but it was hidden from the Rio Kid's view. The killers back of the bar and those in the rear room, commanding the whole saloon, were well-concealed.

"Horrigan!" called the Rio Kid in a loud voice.

The man turned his deep-set eyes on him. For an instant his glance flickered. He was afraid of Bob Pryor, although he had thought to be ready for him.

"Stop the music!" shouted the Rio Kid.

The players saw the Carrington men

bunched in the door. They heard the command. The music died away, and the Rio Kid addressed the crowd.

"Anybody who don't want a ruckus better duck!"

He had to warn the girls, and give them a chance to avoid flying lead. They saw his determined face, the ready guns, and took the hint. Some of the men, too, ran to the sides and ducked behind the thick log slabs of the table tops.

Silence fell over the honkytonk. The Rio Kid broke it, in his clear, commanding voice.

"Horrigan, I want you. Step this way and put yore paws up!"

"For what?" snarled Horrigan.

"You killed Ed Garvey and ordered Weber's death, Horrigan, and the game's up. Drop yore guns!"

He saw Horrigan's hand rising, the movement of the man's right shoulder, the signal for his hidden killers to open fire. After having given the cue, Horrigan dropped behind the end of the bar.

"Let 'em have it, boys!" he bawled. "Give it to the dirty skunks!"

"Down!" roared the Rio Kid.

CHAPTER X

Miner Law

RAPID gunfire bellowed in the honkytonk. But the first shots were high, and the Rio Kid, on his knee to avoid any slugs that might get off from the back room before Portugee opened up, brought his Colt into action. To his left a couple of Horrigan's men were drawing to cut him down. He whipped lead their way, and they flattened out, one rolling over and clutching a punctured arm. Girls began to scream, and men cursed wildly.

Deafening reports roared through the saloon. Three or four heads bobbed up from back of the bar, but they were turning as their startled owners found themselves infiladed. Bullets from Higsbee's men cut into them from the window.

In the back, where Horrigan had set his riflemen behind the camouflaged wall, yelps and mad pandemonium shook the flimsy partition. Suddenly the whole panel gave way and Horrigan's hidden men, stung by Portugee's fire from the windows and rear, came with it. They were met by a point-blank blast from the shotguns and Colts wielded by the Rio Kid, Harrison and his contingent.

"Drop yore irons?" shouted the Rio Kid.

Dave Harrison was inside, slashing the rattled foes. Portugee and Higsbee, also, were leading their men through into the main room.

The Rio Kid rushed down the saloon. Art Horrigan, his jaw dropped in surprised terror at the back-snap of the trap, crouched at the end of the bar, mouthing curses. In his right hand he held a Colt.

"Drop that, Horrigan!" snarled the Rio Kid, leaping at him.

Horrigan's eyes yellowed. He let go of the big pistol as though it had suddenly grown red hot. Then he stared at the stern face of the Rio Kid.

"Don't — don't shoot!" Horrigan begged.

His men had lost heart, too. They were quitting under the prospectors' threatening guns. Some had left by the windows. Acrid powdersmoke was drifting around the hot lamps. Art Horrigan put up his hands and begged for mercy.

"What—what you mean to do to me?" he quavered.

Horrigan, guilty of killing Ed Garvey in cold blood, knew he would be strung up. That was all he could count on.

He backed away, his hands still up, and was trying to dodge away, when the Rio Kid hit him. Staggering aside, as though from the blow, Horrigan bumped into a flimsy table on which stood an oil lamp. It went over and the glass chimney smashed. The kerosene caught fire as it spilled from the big bowl, and rapidly spread flames through the wreckage of the ruined partition.

"Fire!" shrieked Horrigan.

The claim-jumper had purposely tipped over the lamp, hoping to create a diversion. The crackling blaze began to roar. Panic instantly seized many persons in the saloon, and the girls started to run out, screaming. Men, too, fought for the exits.

"Hold it, Horrigan!" cried the Rio Kid, following up his captive.

Seeking to take advantage of the excitement, he made his play. He thrust his right hand into his side pocket. The Rio

Kid knew he had the derringer there, loaded and ready to fire. The scout thumbed back the hammer of his Colt.

Horrigan's derringer exploded, blowing out the side of his black coat. But the thick ball drilled dirt a yard away from Bob Pryor while the Rio Kid, on the other hand, registered a bulls-eye. Horrigan collapsed, his head hitting the dirt, close to the leaping flames.

THE fire settled matters. Already it was cutting through the light roof, and there was no water nearer than the creek. Buckets might have stopped it, had the miners been anxious to save the place.

Most of the renegades had slipped away in the darkness, and escaped.

"Let 'em run, Dave," said the Rio Kid. "They won't be comin' back."

This turned out to be true. The toughs took to the tall timber. Picking up horses where they could, they had headed for other parts.

Horrigan's honkytonk burned with breath-taking speed. Soon the whole roof became a mass of flames. A light-haired dance-hall girl shivered as she touched the Rio Kid's arm, and whimpered.

"Where do we go from here, Mister?"

"Better haid for home, sister," replied the Rio Kid kindly. "Yuh got mixed up with a bad bunch here."

The miners helped the women salvage their belongings from a nearby shack. Red fire roared over the tops of the trees as Art Horrigan's ended its lurid, brief existence. Efforts had to be made to keep the flames from spreading to the woods.

"That score is settled," growled Dave Harrison, to the Rio Kid.

"Shore. But there's other sticks a-floatin', Dave. I aim to even things up with Cud Murphy—and Horrigan's boss."

The sun was up, warming the mountain summits, the forest glades and still-damp ravines when the avengers returned to Carrington. The bright rays dispelled the mist which had blanketed the creek during the cool night.

The little settlement was awake. Women and children were watching anxiously for the return of husbands and fathers. Coffee and beef and cakes were ready, and the hungry vigilantes who had protected themselves in characteristic fashion, by their own efforts, snatched a hasty breakfast.

"Rio Kid!"

Pryor, having swallowed several steaming cups of coffee and consumed a large meal, was rolling a quirly. He turned to find Dora Newton at his side. He smiled at her. He had a warm liking for the beautiful girl. "'Mornin', Ma'am."

She took his hand, looking into his eyes. "Is it true Van is alive? I just heard."

"Yes'm. He's wounded but doin' right well. I reckon we'll take him to the fort, when he's able to be moved."

Dora drew in a deep breath of the cool morning air, thick with the scent of the evergreens.

"Oh, Rio Kid! With the funeral and all, it nearly broke my heart."

He watched her curiously. Yes, he thought, she's in love with Van Weber—deeply in love. He knew how much Weber cared for her.

"I had to do it," the Rio Kid told her gently. "I'm sorry it hurt yuh, Dora, but it had to be tried. Mebbe it saved Weber's life, for the men who shot him would have kept tryin' till they finished him for good. And there were others in it. I had to trap the bushwhackers and clean out that nest of Horrigan's. You savvy?"

She was staring into his clear eyes.

"Yes, Rio Kid, I understand now. May I see Van?"

"Yes'm. He's up at my shack. Mireles is nursin' him. Soon as I've finished some important bus'ness here, I'll ride up with yuh."

When Flash Davis had come to Carrington to attempt to rob the prospectors of their claims, he had caused Cud Murphy to erect a small cabin on a rise westward of the main settlement. It was of rough-cut pine logs, brush and rocks.

When the committee, composed of the Rio Kid, Dave Harrison, Frank Higsbee and Vern Kenny kicked open the door, Cud Murphy was the man who confronted them. He was packing his guns. He scowled at the rough entry. Davis had just dressed, and was eating breakfast at the table.

"What do you fellers want?" growled Murphy, trying to block them.

"Out of the way, Cud," ordered the Rio Kid, sweeping the gunman aside.

SQUAT Cud Murphy swore at Pryor, his greenish eyes darting venomous sparks. He was itching to draw his gun, but Frank Higsbee, who was as strong as two ordinary men, caught Murphy around the body and slammed him to the dirt floor. The Rio Kid bounded toward the startled Davis.

"What's the meaning of this?" cried Flash. "You Frontier scum, Rio Kid, get out of here!"

He leaped to his feet, his rage sharpening his tongue as he told the Rio Kid what he thought of him. Secretly he had hated Bob Pryor, who had blocked the betrayal at Fort Phil Kearney. Now some of his enmity was leaking out.

The Rio Kid promptly slapped Davis across the lips. A trickle of blood dripped from the man's chin. He stopped cursing Pryor, then, and grew white as a sheet, realizing exactly why they were there. His eyes flickered from the Rio Kid's.

Cud Murphy tried to fight. But Higsbee and Dave Harrison snatched his guns and sat on him, holding him quiet.

"We've come after yuh, Davis," said the Rio Kid. "Come along easy."

Flash Davis saw death confronting him, ignominious death. His knees shook. "What—what do you mean? What are you going to do to me?"

"Better take yore medicine graceful, Flash."

The Rio Kid seized him by the arm and flung him out into the morning sunlight. Higsbee dragged Cud Murphy along.

It was a grim procession. The starch, the egotistical pride, had ebbed from Flash Davis. He began to whimper and plead.

Everybody in Carrington had gathered in the little plaza, formed by the crude shacks and cabins of the prospectors. As the men surrounded the two captives, women and children watched from the outskirts. Dora Newton, close to Emma Harrison, stood there with the rest.

Davis's haughty veneer had gone now. He had a hard time standing erect, as the Rio Kid, acting as prosecutor, began his accusation.

"This man, Flash Davis," said Pryor, leveling an accusing finger at the man, "follered yuh down here to steal the gold claims yuh'd staked out. He was in cahoots with Art Horrigan, and a thousand blues to a brass marker, Davis backed Horrigan on this job. From what we overheard last night, Davis has been in touch with Horrigan and his gang of claim-jumpers right along. He tried to warn Horrigan we was comin' after him.

"Ed Garvey was murdered and his body hidden. Somebody forged the deed to Garvey's mine for Horrigan. Then they tried for Van Weber. They caused Van plenty of sufferin' and he ain't out of the woods even yet. I gave out that Weber was daid, hopin' to suck in the claim-jumpers, and it worked. Horrigan and Davis meant to take over Snake Creek."

"You—you lie!" shouted Davis.

"Dry up, Flash. I ain't through yet."

A miner began ostentatiously fashioning a hangman's knot from a length of rope. Davis's eyes widened. Suddenly he broke and fell to his knees, begging for his life.

"Don't kill me—don't!" He blubbered, pawing at the Rio Kid.

"What say, boys?" growled the Rio Kid.

"String him up!" shouted somebody.

Dora Newton broke away from Emma Harrison and came through the crowd toward the Rio Kid.

"Don't kill them," she said gently.

HER appeal turned the tide. "Get tar and feathers!" yelled a prospector. "We'll give 'em a sendoff."

The killing mood averted, pitch was mixed, and a pillow cut open for feather. The men laughed and jested. Tar was smeared on the clothing of Flash Davis and Cud Murphy. Then the feathers thrown on them. Yelling men sent the two weird figures on rails, and rode them out of the settlement, dumping them in the creek.

Glad to escape with their lives, Murphy and Davis crawled from the stream and ran into the wood, hurried by shots from the prospectors' pistols.

Impelled by his terror of death, Flash Davis crashed through the brush and woods, thinking only of putting distance between himself and Carrington. Cud Murphy lumbered behind, cursing dully. Davis led the panic flight

But as they were not pursued, Davis regained some of his self-control, and

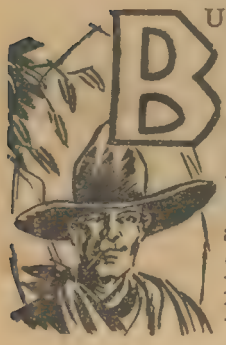
when they were a couple of miles from the settlement on Snake Creek, he sank down, gasping, to get his breath. Murphy came up with him. The exercise and the sun had nearly dried them, sweated as they were.

"What now, Boss?" growled Cud, blinking down at his master.

"I'll—I'll kill every one of them for that!" gasped Davis, eyes rolling in helpless fury. "They'll suffer. I'll never rest till they pay for what they did to me. The Rio Kid—I'll see him cut to pieces bit by bit! Tortured, for days!"

CHAPTER XI

Vengeful Hate



BURNING remembrance of his own behavior, that he had groveled and begged for his life before Dora Newton and the crowd, was torture to Flash Davis's vanity. He had a hard struggle to conquer his fury, but finally he managed. When he had, in some measure, regained his self control, he rose to his feet.

"C'mon, Cud," he said. "We'll walk to the fort. We can make it in two or three days."

It proved to be hard going. They had no food except roots which Murphy dug with his clasp-knife. Their feet hurt from the stony trail. It took two days before they sighted the stockade of Fort Phil Kearney, and staggered wearily to the gates, faces scratched and covered with grime, clothing torn and still black from the pitch which had been smeared on them by the angry miners.

The fort was humming with activity. With the better weather, and Red Cloud's preoccupation with the buffalo hunt, parties of gold seekers were traveling the Bozeman Trail to Montana. There were others heading for Snake Creek and the vicinity of the Rio Kid's strike. Traders, trappers, reservation Indians whose tribes were enemies of the Sioux and friendly to the United States, thronged the camping-grounds under the fort's walls. The trail was still dangerous, for Red Cloud had left small bands of his warriors to harass those using it, but with the main body of the Sioux far eastward on the Dakota plains, life was almost normal.

The guard reported the arrival of Flash Davis and Cud Murphy. Colonel Carrington came to question them.

"Colonel, we were attacked by a small party of Sioux on the way to the fort," said Davis. "They got our horses but we managed to escape by hiding in a swamp. I need clothing and food."

Carrington was sympathetic. The bedraggled pair looked forlorn, helpless.

"You shall have what you need, Davis."

After a meal and rest, bathed and clad in fresh apparel, Flash Davis was himself again.

When Cud Murphy entered the cabin in which Davis was resting himself, he was smoking a cigar Carrington had given him.

"Indian Wells is here, Boss! I just bumped into him outside. He's here to see you. Red Cloud sent him."

"Good. I'll talk with him now."

Stored in a warehouse, under false labels in the Frontier town of Cheyenne, Flash Davis had five thousand fine rifles, and ammunition for them. It was this deal which had brought him to Fort Kearney, to bargain with Red Cloud. Balked at the mines, he now turned back to his original mission.

Indian Wells was waiting for him outside the stockade at a deserted spot. The half-breed wore white man's garb now, his shifty eyes watching Davis from under a coonskin cap. Buckskin shirt and fringed pants, boots to his shins, and he looked no different from many of the trappers who frequented the fort.

"Wells! Glad to see you."

Indian Wells grunted. "Red Cloud wants you," he said. "He now has gold and furs to pay for rifles, half at least."

"Where is he?"

Indian Wells shrugged. He waved vaguely toward the east and Dakota. "The Great Chief is there. But he will be back here. Fort Kearney will be destroyed and Carrington's scalp hung on Red Cloud's lodgepole. The Sioux will never surrender."

Flash Davis nodded; the Indians had a habit of making long, grandiloquent boasts and he listened as Indian Wells spoke.

"Take me to the chief?" he said.

Flash Davis had been making his plans. With Red Cloud an ally he could accomplish anything.

WHILE Davis was making preparations to accompany Indian Wells, Cud Murphy hurried in.

"There's a wagon comin' in, Boss. The Rio Kid and Portugee Phillips are with it. They got Van Weber. That purty leetle Newton doll is nursin' him. Reckon they brought Weber here so the surgeon could fix him up."

Flash Davis swore. Hot hate against the Rio Kid and his friends surged in his heart. But he knew that their story would cause Carrington to arrest him, and he hurriedly finished his preparations. Murphy and he rode from the west gate of the fort as the Rio Kid's caravan slowly entered the south entrance.

Indian Wells, on a fast buckskin mustang, joined Davis and Murphy up over the rise. They moved swiftly off the Bozeman Trail into the mountains, over rough trails which the breed knew well.

For three days, fed by the expert Wells and guided ever eastward, after bypassing Fort Phil Kearney on the north, they rode on. The hills had tapered off to the vast plains of the Dakotas. In a large dry ravine which split the flats, Davis found Red Cloud encamped.

Great piles of buffalo hides lay about; the Sioux were hunting in a number of scattered bands. Meat was drying in the sun. After the braves had made the kill, it had been stripped from the big carcases by the bee-like squaws.

Dusty, tired out, but burning with his desire to destroy the Rio Kid and all who had balked him, Flash Davis greeted the great Chief of the Oglala. Sioux warriors surrounded Red Cloud. These Indians were fierce and undefeated, the greatest of all the tribes of America, and the most numerous and powerful. Their bronzed muscles shone with grease, and the warriors had their black hair braided, eagle feathers denoting an enemy killed in a fair battle.

Red Cloud wore elaborately beaded doeskin and an ornate breech-clout. His mighty torso was naked in the warmth.

"Red Cloud, I'm glad to see you again," cried Davis.

After Indian Wells interpreted, Red Cloud shook hands. He waved a muscular, copper-braceleted arm toward a pile of furs near at hand, bales of expensive skins brought in by his hunters from the mountains.

"He says he will give them for the guns," said Wells.

Flash Davis shook his head. "Tell the chief this: I must have more. There are men who must be paid before the rifles and bullets are released. But I can give him a thousand guns now, if he will do what I ask."

Indian Wells told Red Cloud what Davis said. The chief grunted a question.

"I want a little settlement on Snake Creek destroyed, completely," Davis continued. "There are white men there, taking out gold. If they stay then more will come, and more—until the Sioux will be beaten. The Rio Kid, who helped Portugee Phillips get the word to Fort Laramie and save Carrington, and who prevented Red Cloud's braves from breaking into the fort that night, may be there. They're his friends."

Red Cloud drank this in. Davis could not tell whether or not the chief was impressed.

"How many braves will you need?" inquired Indian Wells.

"There are only thirty fighters there," answered Davis. "Two to three hundred Sioux would be sufficient."

Red Cloud nodded. Flash Davis hugged himself with inward joy. His revenge would be complete. . . .

Back in Fort Phil Kearney Colonel Carrington was talking with the Rio Kid.

"I'm glad you're back, Rio Kid. What does the surgeon say about Van Weber?"

"Bullet's lodged close to his lung, sir. But the doc reckons he can get it out without killin' Weber."

"We'll keep him here till he's fully mended. How did he get hurt?"

"We had some trouble down there, Colonel. Bunch of polecats tried to jump our friends' claims. Art Horrigan was in on it. He's daid. Flash Davis, that smooth hombre who was here before, and Cud Murphy were helpin' Horrigan. The miners rode 'em out of camp on a rail."

Carrington frowned. "Why, Davis was here a short time ago, Rio Kid," he said. "I gave him assistance."

Pryor jumped up. "Is he at the fort?"

"No, he rode out a little while before you arrived. One of the sentries reported that he had been seen talking to a half-breed trapper named Indian Wells."

"Indian Wells? Shore. I know that weasel."

"Davis got off too easy, there at Carrington," said Pryor.

"How's the gold washing coming along?"

"Fine, Colonel. Looks like a big field openin' up on Snake Creek."

"Glad to hear it. It's flattering to have a settlement named after me."

The Rio Kid anxiously searched the C.O.'s strong face. It was lined, and grim, but the eyes shone with indomitable will.

"Any luck, Colonel?" he asked softly.

By Carrington's quick shake of the head, the Rio Kid knew that Fort Kearney's builder had been disappointed again. Carrington wanted more troops, more guns and stores. "Fact of the matter is, Rio Kid," Carrington informed Pryor, "there's an investigation under way concerning Captain Fetterman's death and the loss of our men."

"But Colonel, we all heard yuh order Fetterman not to go out too far."

Carrington shrugged.

"Rio Kid, I need you," he said gravely. "Red Cloud is planning his next campaign against me. Watch carefully, ceaselessly, for the return of the Sioux. The chief is fiendishly clever."

"Yes, sir. I reckon the buffalo huntin' 'll keep the Sioux busy for a while, though."

"You can never be certain with Red Cloud. He's a smart soldier."

Carrington did not hate his arch-enemy. The long duel which had gone on between them had given him high respect for Red Cloud's fighting power and ability as a general.

Later, the Rio Kid visited Van Weber's bedside. Dora Newton sat close to the young man, holding his hand. Van grinned up at the Rio Kid.

"Doc says he got the slug out, Van, and that yuh're goin' to be fine."

"That's right. I can breathe without it hurtin' now."

"He'll be well before he knows it," declared Dora.

[*Turn page*]

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"That's the stuff. Yuh'll soon be back there diggin' out gold."

In the following days, as Weber rapidly regained his strength and left his bed, the Rio Kid scouted the mountains, watching the deertrails for signs of the Sioux.

Portugee Phillips and Celestino Mireles were with him. Once they came up on a small bivouac which Indians had occupied not long before. But only a handful of braves had been there. No doubt it was one of the little bands left by Red Cloud to harass the Bozeman Trail until the return of the main Sioux forces.

Often the trio hunted, for antelope, mountain sheep and bear, or smaller game which was a welcome addition to the hardtack and canned beef at Fort Phil Kearney.

Van Weber, after a short rest at the fort, took his leave of his friends there. A small party of new arrivals wished to go to Snake Creek to prospect. There were women among them and Dora accompanied them, returning to her friends, the Harrisons. Van Weber guided the party. He was eager to return to his claim, for he hoped to win a fortune and Dora.

CHAPTER XII

Gathering Threat

WHEN Weber and his party left, the Rio Kid and his two trailmates, Portugee and Celestino, were at the fort.

"What say we ride east for a day or two, boys, and try to pick up a buffalo or two?" suggested the Rio Kid. "We can scout on the way. The Sioux are in that direction."

The others were agreeable. Saddling up, the three headed away from Fort Kearney. Always alert and willing to fight, the Rio Kid and his friends moved through the first day without any trouble. Next morning they rose at dawn, ate and got ready. They took a side trail that skirted a small mountain rill.

"There's a trapper's cabin," said the Rio Kid suddenly.

They pulled up, and scouted the place. It seemed deserted. It was the summer camp of some lone woodsman, built of branches and stones and partially hidden in the woods. Saber sniffed uneasily and rippled his black stripe.

"Somethin's wrong, boys," muttered the Rio Kid.

He got down and moved nearer, covered by the guns of Portugee and Mireles. The door was open and he saw a figure lying in the shadowed interior. Entering, he found a naked mass of horror, for the man had been scalped after torture. Arrows were sticking from the torso like pins from a cushion.

"Portugee!" called the Rio Kid softly.

Phillips joined him. "By jupe, the Sioux 've been here!" exclaimed Portugee, staring down at the victim.

"Yep, and not half a day ago."

Immediately suspicious, they cast about, hunting sign. Skilful as the Indians were at hiding their tracks, they found enough to realize that a large band of Sioux had come through.

"There may be more bands of 'em on other trails," mused Bob Pryor. "I wonder if the colonel was right about Red Cloud sneakin' back early?" He turned to his friends. "C'mon, boys. We've got to check up on this."

The Rio Kid thought the savages were heading toward Fort Kearney and the Bozeman Trail. The situation might be serious. Nostrils wide in the excitement of the chase—hunting men was much more thrilling than hunting animals—the Rio Kid took the lead.

The Sioux had dragged pine branches behind their horses to brush out the trail, but the Rio Kid could read this from loose needles and small, broken tips of the conifers left on the track. The Indians were well off the usual trails frequented by whites and had evidently thought themselves safe in killing the trapper. Perhaps the man had observed them and they did not wish their presence reported.

Luck had been with the three. Otherwise the Sioux might have smelled them out before the scouts realized the presence of such a large force. It looked like a war party to the Rio Kid, and he began to check the trail. The Sioux would have scouts in the rear, no doubt. The savages were traveling fast and light.

"Wonder if Red Cloud's with 'em?" Pryor asked himself.

When night fell, they were still behind the Sioux. Moving cautiously on, they only paused for snatches of rest.

Next day, the Rio Kid, realizing they were coming near the enemy, left Saber and crept carefully to a wooded ridge. Inching forward on his abdomen, he saw, far below, the Indian bivouac. The hostiles had stopped for the day, for they were close to Fort Kearney.

In shadow, so there would be no telltale gleam of the sun to betray his presence, the Rio Kid raised his field-glasses and focused them on the spot below. Most of the Sioux were concealed by the screen of woods along the mountain rill where they had camped. But he was able to pick out the grazing mustang herd, guarded by herders. The animals had to forage and the grass grew greenest in spots where the trees did not offer too much shade.

"Must be three hundred," Pryor decided, estimating the number of horses. "That'll be two hundred-fifty or so bucks." They would have spare mounts along for emergencies, as always.

PATIENTLY he watched. Now and then a bronzed Sioux came into his field of vision at the edge of the woods, to drink from the stream. At last he sighted a tall, majestic figure.

"Red Cloud!" he muttered.

Colonel Carrington must be informed of Red Cloud's presence. He crept carefully back the way he had come, picked up Saber and rode to report to his two friends, hidden back on the trail.

"Red Cloud and two or three hundred Injuns, boys," he announced, squatting on his haunches. "They're huntin' mischief, I reckon. Portugee, how you feel?"

"Sleepy," grinned Portugee.

"Reckon yuh can stay awake long enough to reach the fort and tell the colonel? Celestino and I'll stick with 'em and try to find where they camp. It'd be right fine thing for Carrington if he could capture Red Cloud."

"Yep. I'll ride."

Portugee, a wad of tobacco in his leathery cheek, waved his hand and rode off toward the Bozeman Trail. He would be at the fort by nightfall, to report to Colonel Carrington.

Red Cloud and his braves moved on at sundown. The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles followed, feeling their way as a half moon rose in the sky. It was dangerous work, for the Sioux might catch them as they trailed.

Confident that Red Cloud would swing north to the fort and enter the Peno Valley beyond Lodge Trail Ridge, his old stamping-grounds, the Rio Kid was startled as the Sioux, moving swiftly before him, turned south and crossed the Bozeman Trail.

Soon he found it was no diversion. They kept going. By dawn they were many miles south of Fort Phil Kearney.

"Celestino! There's only one place they could be haided now. That's Snake Creek."

"*Si, si,* Gen-e-ral!"

Alarm that was almost panic caught the Rio Kid. Red Cloud was driving toward the little settlement where his miner friends were.

"Celestino, yuh'll have to cut for the fort, and ride plumb fast. Tell the colonel to send cavalry down pronto if he wants to save them folks."

After having seen Mireles whirl his horse around and gallop away at top speed, the Rio Kid hurried on south, with a sense of impending horror. If Red Cloud struck Carrington settlement, without warning, the place would be utterly wiped out, the men killed and tortured, the women enslaved.

"How'd Red Cloud find out about 'em, and why's he goin' after 'em like this?" he pondered.

The buffalo grounds were far eastward. Why had Red Cloud suddenly come back, to destroy the prospectors?

By dark the savages were within striking distance of Carrington. They had moved boldly on the beaten trail, and the Rio Kid had been forced to follow at a distance. He moved up, to find they were camped in a wooded ravine. But they had scouts watching the trail to Carrington.

"I've got to get ahaid and warn the miners," he decided. "Reckon the red devils'll hit at dawn."

It had been necessary to rest Saber and himself, and under the stars and bloated moon, the Rio Kid sought a way around his cruel enemies.

Night birds and peepers sounded from all sides. A little brook, water for the

Sioux, made its own noises. Pryor detoured, hoping to get past the foe without being observed or heard. Carrington lay a couple of hours ride below. But first he had to make a way through the rough country flanking the trail.

THE Rio Kid was worn to a frazzle. He had been on the alert, following Red Cloud, with little chance to sleep. But Bob Pryor's friends. Van Weber and Dora, Dave Harrison, Higsbee, their women, were all in mortal danger.

He found a way through. Leading the dun, he moved as quietly southward, skirting the Indian camp.

Suddenly, Saber sniffed, showing his distaste. The Rio Kid jumped aside, pulling the horse out of the way. Something stung Bob Pryor's right side, under the shoulder blade. Shadows closed in, quickly.

As Pryor reeled under the shock, he realized an arrow had wounded him. His Colt was blasting. The Sioux on the left went down. With blood pouring down his back, the Rio Kid swung his weapon to deal with the second savage. The Indian fell.

Animal-like howls rose. Answers came from nearby. The whole Sioux camp had been aroused.

"No use to hide now, they'll smell us out," Pryor muttered.

He leaped on the dun's back and spurted ahead, determined not to retreat.

His right arm felt paralyzed. He could shoot with his left, however, and low over the dun, he galloped recklessly on, guiding Saber with his knees. The excited Indians were dashing toward the scene of the fight. He had but a few moments to get past.

"Got to make it," the scout muttered.

The slope was growing steep and the dun slowed. The Sioux were fanning out, and stabs of flame came from the thickets. The dun slid down the other side of the rise, and from the left came more slugs, ceaselessly hunting for the scout.

He broke off to the right, trying for the main trail to Carrington, not silence but haste his main idea now. Gritting his teeth, he held on and rode for Snake Creek.

But Sioux had mounted mustangs for the pursuit. Saber burst from the thickets onto the rutted wagon track through the wilderness, and raced southward toward the settlement. With open road, the dun hit his beautiful, long-legged stride and the Rio Kid settled down to it. The jolting hurt his wounded side but he knew, as he recovered his self-control, that the injury wasn't more than a flesh wound. He suffered only from torn muscles and loss of blood from lacerated flesh. But the arrow, still stuck in his back, hampered him. He sought to reach around and pull it out. However, it was in an awkward position and he could not get it.

The Indians were sticking to the pursuit, alarmed by his presence. They did not want anyone to warn their victims. Powerful Sioux warriors rode like the wind, and as the race proceeded, the Rio Kid had to coax every bit of speed from Saber to stay in front.

The gray of dawn showed on his left. As the new light came up, the Rio Kid glanced back over his shoulder. Three lithe, coppery Indians, out ahead of the main bunch, were only a couple of hundred yards behind him. He could see them plainly as they came onto a rise, hot on his trail. Torture and death would be his lot if they caught him, if a lucky bullet made a hit, or the dun stumbled.

The light slowly grew. The miles to Snake Creek seemed interminable to the breathless rider. On the last rise, with Snake Creek Valley spreading before him, he glanced back again and he could see the Sioux strung out in a quarter-mile long column, riding like the centaurs they were. In the van was Red Cloud, on a magnificent paint horse, urging his warriors to greater exertions.

"There it is, Saber!" murmured the Rio Kid. "One last jump, now!"

HE BEGGED his mount for a final burst of speed. He could see the smoke of breakfast fires in the reddening sky, over the mining camp of Carrington. Reaching the creek trail, he began firing his revolver, in bursts of three shots, the Frontier warning of danger. He had but a few minutes to spare, for the Sioux were on the summit, dropping into the valley.

Splashing across Snake Creek, he shoved the dripping dun up the bank and before him lay the log huts. Dave Harrison was standing outside his cabin.

staring toward the creek. He had heard the shots and carried his rifle crooked in his arm. Frank Higsbee and the Kennys were out, too.

"What's up, Rio Kid?" cried Harrison.

"The Sioux, Red Cloud—comin' lickety-split! Get everybody into the meetin'-house! Pronto now!"

Flinging himself from Saber's back, the Rio Kid seized the sledge hammer and beat the big iron ring, the Indian alarm. Prospectors came rushing out, guns in hand. Harrison, Higsbee, and those ready followed the Rio Kid to the creek bank, taking cover, to slow the Sioux.

Dora Newton, Emma Harrison, other women and the children darted into the square meeting-house, built of heavy logs.

The advance line of the Sioux appeared across the creek. The Rio Kid let go with his Colt. Harrison's rifle banged, and the battle began. A Sioux flew from his mustang, and hot slugs came back at the miners.

More fighting men were entering the battle, and their lead helped to slow the first rush. Red Cloud dashed up to command the attack. The main body of warriors arrived, and red horsemen splashed valiantly through the creek, while war-whoops split the morning air.

The prospectors of Carrington were outnumbered seven or eight to one. The Rio Kid, watching as he fired from behind a big boulder, could see that the Indians had new-style repeaters, and belts of ammunition for them slung across brawny shoulders.

Red Cloud gave his orders. The Sioux in the open slipped into the bush, disappearing like snakes. Then two columns of the redmen began to cross on either flank, seeking to encircle the whole settlement.

"Back to the buildin's, boys," bellowed the Rio Kid.

The Rio Kid's alarm had given the settlers the minutes needed to get the women and children to the thick-walled meeting-house at the center of the plaza. Having snatched up ever ready guns and belts of ammuntion, the prospectors retreated into the little fort-like structure. It had been built for this purpose, as well as to house their entertainments and meetings. There were loopholes in the walls. Barrels of water stood inside.

The Rio Kid peered from a narrow slit. It was fairly wide inside, angled so a marksman could aim his gun where he wished.

Red Cloud yelled hurried orders. The chief's strategy and tactics were first-class. Inside of five minutes he had completely surrounded the settlement, and when he saw that the whites had reached the safety of the thick-walled structure, he held his men back from suicidal frontal assaults. The prospectors were firing at flitting figures among the surrounding trees or at scouts who had rushed in to shelter behind various cabins.

"Hold yore fire unless yuh're dang shore of yore mark," ordered the Rio Kid.

CHAPTER XIII

Grim Struggle

LATER Dora Newton came to Bob Pryor bearing a tin pan filled with water and some clean clothes. The arrow was still sticking in Pryor's back. Harrison cut off the feathered end. The point was almost through the skin, for it had been deflected by a rib. Carefully, Harrison extracted the Sioux arrowhead, and Dora washed the wound and bound it. It hurt, but the Rio Kid gritted his teeth. The shock had passed, and he was able to use his right hand to shoot.

"There goes my house," growled Harrison.

Smoke was slowly rising from behind his log cabin. And others were being fired. The breeze was from the west. Thick, acrid smoke drifted down on them. Red Cloud was seeking to smoke them out, and to create a screen behind which his warriors might creep in.

Hoping to overwhelm miners before they were well prepared, Red Cloud sent his first wave in against the little fort. Running, shouting braves stormed from every side.

"Let 'em have it, boys," cried the Rio Kid.

Cool-headed fighting men held their

fire until the Sioux were close. Then they poured lead into the massing savages. Many Sioux fell. But their friends picked them up, and carried them quickly back, for the Indians never left wounded or dead on the field if they could avoid it.

The wind died and turned, variable in the early morn. The smoke blew off, exposing the attackers.

The Rio Kid, watching from his loophole, particularly noticed a lanky Indian, with Sioux paint and eagle feather. Something familiar about the fellow struck Pryor.

Suddenly he realized who the man was.

"Indian Wells!" he exclaimed.

The Sioux had been stopped in their tracks. Red Cloud, seeing his men cut up by the whites, howled orders, and the attackers melted into the woods.

The Rio Kid rolled himself a quirly. "We got a breathin' spell," he drawled. He sat down, back to the wall. Others watched for the return of the foe.

"Red Cloud's consultin' with his men," announced Van Weber.

The young fellow was almost recovered from his injuries. He had lost some weight and there was a pallor under his bronzed flesh but he was able to work and fight again.

"They're drawin' off," said Dave Harrison.

The Rio Kid nodded. "They won't hit that way again. Red Cloud's figgerin' it out. Mebbe he'll wait till night and try then." His eyes were heavy from lack of sleep. He dozed, snatching forty winks while he could.

Then he started up, wide awake.

"Indian Wells! Why, he hung out with Flash Davis and Cud Murphy, at the fort. He's supposed to be a trapper and a friend of the whites."

What did it mean? The Rio Kid swore he would look into it, provided he ever got the chance.

"Here they come," said Weber.

No one knew better than the Rio Kid what it would mean if Red Cloud overcame their hurriedly-manned defenses. Yet he knew he was lucky, for while he liked all those inside the garrison, he had no wife, no sweetheart, no child in that anxious crowd.

There was a special mental torture in the thought that a beloved female might fall into Indian hands. Dave Harrison, Frank Higsbee, Van Weber, were thinking of their loved ones. They made secret preparations to save a last bullet for a wife or sweetheart, to keep them from the Sioux.

RED CLOUD kept stabbing at them. He had burnt several cabins, after looting them and dividing the stuff among his braves. The Sioux also had a circle of scouts out, to keep from being surprised while attacking Carrington. They maintained a horrid din, hurling insults and slugs at the whites.

Mounted warriors, some in full feathered war-bonnets, would ride in, shrieking and shooting at the loopholes and narrow windows. They would sweep down the line, swerving at the last moment. Many rode with just a heel showing for a target, clinging to the mane of the mustang and the blanket rope, and firing under the animal's neck. A hit on one of these flying horses would send the lithe savage rolling over and over in a springy ball. Then he would mount behind a comrade and dash back to safety.

Red Cloud sought to draw their fire. He was sure the white's ammunition would be limited, as it was.

"Don't waste yore bullets," the Rio Kid kept cautioning the prospectors.

"You'll git plenty chance later, boys." He knew that Red Cloud would try a full scale charge after dark.

In the excitement of the alarm that dawn, many had snatched up only a belt or two of ammunition. The Sioux had taken what they found in the shacks, while some hidden stores popped like firecrackers in the blazing ruins. The Rio Kid, having had Dave Harrison make a count, knew that a few concentrated volleys would exhaust their vital munitions.

He snatched a little nap, and felt better. He had a ready smile, and his coolness comforted those inside the little fort. Had it not been for his scouting, and recognition of Red Cloud's objective, the entire settlement would have been wiped out.

Hours dragged on, with the strong, ferocious enemy bedeviling them. Only a few rounds of ammunition interposed between them and horrible death. The smoke, their anxiety over their loved ones, trapped with them, dominated the

minds of the besieged. Loss of property was nothing compared to these primary concerns.

They had but a few snatches of food, that quickly disappeared among the large numbers of people. The water barrels had to be rationed.

"What d'yuh think, Rio Kid?" asked Van Weber in a low voice, as he crouched near his friend that afternoon.

Outside, the Sioux howled and fired at the loops.

Bob Pryor shrugged. "Dark's what worries me, Van. That's why I told the boys to catnap now, while they can."

Weber nodded, his eyes cool. But the Rio Kid knew he was thinking of Dora Newton, who was across the room, keeping some of the younger ones occupied. She showed a brave spirit.

"I'll save one for her and the last for myself," said Van Weber.

The Rio Kid did not reply. Weber was right and there was nothing he could say about it.

"I wonder if Celestino made it!" he mused, watching the sun redden over the mountains. Smoke still rose from the ruins of the shacks and the air was thick, unpleasant, filled with the odors of burnt matter.

Had the Mexican reached Fort Kearney and Colonel Carrington? There was always the chance that Red Cloud might have covered the trails to the fort, to cut off any such messengers.

The Rio Kid had found a pail of roof pitch in a corner. From a bench he cut some sticks about a foot long, and dipped the ends in the pitch. These he distributed about the garrison. They would serve as torches.

AS DARK dropped over the wilderness, Red Cloud attacked. He swooped in with the suddenness of a hawk.

But the Rio Kid was expecting it. He had his men set and ready at the loopholes and windows. Intently listening, his keen ears caught the stealthy approach. He lighted one of his torches and gave an order. Several were tossed out, and they formed a ring of yellow light, showing the ghostly, painted shapes of the Sioux.

"Fire!" ordered the Rio Kid.

A blast issued from the whites, answered by the Indians. Shrieks rose, and the Sioux picked up their casualties and ran for their lives.

After a few minutes, Red Cloud sent in another wave. Again the Rio Kid had to order a volley. Bullets were precious, growing scarcer. A few more such attacks, and the store would be done.

Red Cloud no doubt sensed this. Perhaps it was because of the way the whites held their fire until the last minute, or simply because he guessed they had not had time to run much in. He kept feinting at them, stabbing, seeking to get braves up under the windows. Burning arrows were shot onto the roof, but there was a trapdoor through which the garrison could extinguish the little fires that began.

Midnight came, the hours dragging like interminable stretches of eternity.

"Here they come ag'in!"

Settler guns blared, the Sioux shrieked, as arrows and slugs sailed into the logs, thudding, whanging, singing. Several defenders had been wounded.

Red Cloud allowed them no rest. The night seemed alive with the creeping, deadly Sioux.

Somehow the time passed. In the lulls, men and women managed to snatch a few winks.

"Dawn ain't far away," thought the worn Rio Kid. He was aching for a real sleep, but could afford nothing but catnaps. "Where's Carrington?" He began to fear that Mireles had been waylaid.

Just before the first streaks of the new day, Red Cloud ordered a desperate charge. Howling Sioux dashed forward once more, thick as ants. Their slugs, from the fine new rifles, battered the loops and openings. Torches, the last of them, were tossed out, so that the settlers might see their targets.

Acrid powdersmoke caught at their throats and eyes, as they stubbornly fired into the attackers. The Indians came to the walls, battering at the thick, barricaded doors. The Rio Kid, his Colts booming, leaped from spot to spot, holding the command.

Even while it seemed they would be overwhelmed, the punishment became too hot for the Sioux, and the Indians broke and retreated to the woods.

"One more," thought the Rio Kid.

He moved to Van Weber's side.

"After the next one, Van," he whispered, "that's all there is. Savvy?"

"I savvy." Weber's voice had a metallic quality. He was steeling himself for what he must do. He would shoot Dora to prevent her from becoming a captive of the Sioux.

Such a terrible choice had been forced upon pioneers and Army men before. The unanimous opinion was that it was far better to die than to be a Sioux prisoner. The Rio Kid made the rounds, cautioning Harrison and other key men that the end was at hand.

"Again!" warned a lookout.

The Rio Kid was startled. Red Cloud had just withdrawn and yet he was coming again, without giving his men a breathing-spell. Gun in hand, he glanced from a loophole. The Sioux were mounted now, and driving in, shooting.

"Last chance," he thought.

His Colts began to bang, and the rifles inside the building roared. Men were shooting their final rounds.

Watching the Sioux come, the Rio Kid picked off a big brave in the van. Then he suddenly began to cheer.

"What's up, what is it?" demanded Van Weber.

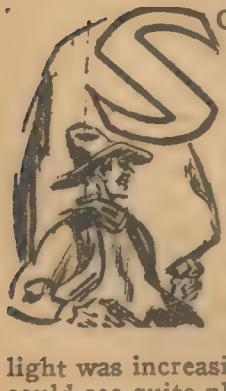
Weber had just tossed down his empty rifle and drawn his revolver, moving toward Dora Newton, huddled with a group of her charges.

"What's happened?" asked Harrison.

"Didn't you hear that bugle? The Sioux did!"

CHAPTER XIV

Rescue



SCOUTS, sent out by Red Cloud had given warning, and shrieks of baffled rage came from savage throats. The line of mounted warriors turned off and splashed across Snake Creek, and as the hubbub died out, they again caught the cavalry bugle sounding the Charge. The gray light was increasing in the sky and they could see quite plainly.

The Rio Kid went outside. His shrill whistle brought Saber galloping in from the woods, where the trained dun had sought concealment from the Indians. No danger of them capturing the dun. Saber hated the smell of the savages and had given them a wide berth.

Hearing gunfire across Snake Creek, the Rio Kid forded the stream and galloped up the path taken by Red Cloud.

At the top of the hill, where the trees thinned, he sighted the charging cavalry. They were bluecoats, men from Fort Phil Kearney, and he saw the handsome figure of Colonel Henry Carrington leading his main body of troopers. Carrington had brought two hundred fighters with him and they were more than a match for Red Cloud's braves.

Young officers, eager to make a name for themselves on the Frontier, led their squadrons, directed by Carrington's cool brain.

A skirmish took place, the charging cavalry cutting through the running Sioux. Red Cloud quickly realized that he could not hope to win. This was not the type of warfare at which he and his men were efficient. He gave commands, and the Sioux split up into small bands, taking to the woods, running every which way, like insects from a scattered anthill.

"Celestino made it!" thought the Rio Kid joyfully.

He called out to his friends from the fort, and rode up to greet Carrington. The battle was over, although soldiers were still chasing some of the bands of Indians. Few of the cavalry mounts could keep up with the lithe Indian horses.

"Howdy, Colonel," sang out the Rio Kid. "Mighty glad yuh're here."

Mireles shouted at him, and Portugee Phillips, who had come along on the ride.

"Good morning, Rio Kid." Carrington smiled at him. "I had your messages. Nice work."

"Yes, sir. Yuh come just in time."

Carrington's expert eye told him that the fight was done, so he gave an order to his bugler, and Recall sounded.

"The folks'll want to thank yuh, Colonel," said the Rio Kid. "Yore town ain't far away."

"I'd like to see it."

Stragglers, checked by the bugle, were turning and coming in. Carrington swung his column toward the settlement, riding beside the Rio Kid.

"I can't understand what possessed Red Cloud to make this attack," the Army officer remarked.

"I ain't shore myself—yet."

The Rio Kid pulled up Saber, as they came near the creek. A rifle, dropped by a Sioux whom he had slain on the way up, lay sticking from the bush. He picked it up and handed it to Carrington, who examined it carefully.

"This is a condemned Army gun, Rio Kid," said the C.O. at last.

"Yes, sir. See how bad it is."

Carrington tried it. "Perfect," he said. "The Sioux are all armed with 'em. New weapons and plenty of bullets to fit."

CARRINGTON was frowning, as he watched the play of the handsome scout's face. "You know something about this, Rio Kid?"

"I can't put my finger on anything yet, sir. But I got a hunch. You savvy Indian Wells? He was seen at the fort with Flash Davis and Cud Murphy. I'm wonderin' now how much connection there is, because I spotted Indian Wells with Red Cloud, down here. Yuh recall how Art Horrigan's man opened the South Gate to the Sioux that night? And Horrigan and Davis were thick as the thieves they are."

Carrington was thoughtful as the detachment formed in and resumed its march. Cheering settlers welcomed the soldiers to the little town which had been named in the C.O.'s honor.

A meal was cooked and served. The Rio Kid, too tired to eat, retired to a quiet nook and instantly fell asleep.

When he woke, it was late afternoon. Carrington was preparing to return to the fort with his men, and the settlers were looking over their burnt homes, planning on how to rebuild. The Rio Kid ate a huge meal, and groomed Saber. That night he slept again, and in the early dawn, Carrington marched back on the trail northward to his post.

The Rio Kid had made his plans. He communicated them to Portugee Phillips and Celestino. "I'm goin' to try and track down Indian Wells, and see if my hunch is right, boys. If Flash Davis sicked Red Cloud on us, I want to savvy. I'm bettin' he's a gun-runner. It all fits in to a picture."

"I'm guessin' yuh're right, Rio Kid."

"I wonder how many of those new guns Davis has? Injuns would sell their hides for 'em. Red Cloud's tryin' to entice several other tribes into this fight ag'in Carrington, and together they might turn the trick." Resting up, refurbishing, getting their horses ready for a long ride, the three scouts tarried another night at Carrington.

"I ain't had much luck since I first found that big nugget, Rio Kid," Van Weber told him. "Harrison, and several others've struck big veins, but my claim's peterin' out."

Weber was disappointed. He saw his hopes of marrying Dora vanishing like mist before a hot sun.

"Have yuh tried blastin' out the creek bank, Van?" asked the Rio Kid. "It might bring better results. I noticed a quartz ledge on yore claim."

"I ain't. Yuh think it'd be a good idee?"

"C'mon. I'll help yuh."

The Rio Kid fashioned crude powder charges, from metal containers and fuses. He accompanied Weber to Weber's claim on Snake Creek, and they drilled into the split rocks and lighted the fuses.

[*Turn page*]

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(Adv.)

A big explosion followed and bits of stone and débris rained thickly on the trees. Moving in after it was over, the Rio Kid and Weber cleaned away the dirt.

"That did it, Rio Kid!"

"Yep, there's yore main vein, and it's plumb rich, Van! There's a small fortune in there."

Weber pressed Pryor's hand. They could see the thickness of the gold, cased in rotten quartz. Weber was excited. His eyes sparkled as he set feverishly to work with pick, shovel and sieve. Now perhaps he might be able to marry Dora.

But the yellow metal held little lure for the Rio Kid. The settlers were safe for the time being. Red Cloud's Sioux were off in Dakota, and the raiding band which had come to strike Carrington had scattered. Questions of state occupied Pryor's mind, and with his two trail-mates, Celestino and Portugee, he took his leave of his miner friends, riding north on the trail of the fleeing Sioux....

DAYS later, from a height, the Rio Kid was watching the great camp of the Sioux on the plains below.

Heading east, Red Cloud's raiding band had returned to the hunting grounds. Now they were resting, and boasting of their exploits in the fight at Carrington. The Indians had no suspicion they were being watched. Portugee and Mireles assisted Bob Pryor in the vigil. The scouts took turns, observing the camp ceaselessly from a distance.

The morning following Red Cloud's return, a horseman left the Sioux camp. With his field-glasses, the Rio Kid inspected the rider.

"Indian Wells," he murmured triumphantly.

No longer painted and clad as a Sioux brave, Indian Wells had returned to his guise as a Frontiersman, buckskin and coon cap, long rifle. His horse was saddled, and he headed southeast, passing not far from the spot where the Rio Kid watched.

Pryor joined his two friends. They saddled up and stealthily followed the renegade, keeping well back. They camped while he slept through the night. Then once more they trailed Indian Wells south and west.

It was a long chase, and the Rio Kid was surprised as he found it ending in the red-hot Frontier town of Cheyenne, the biggest settlement in Wyoming. Indian Wells entered the town with his rifle across his saddle, a typical trapper coming in from the mountains or plains.

The town was roaring. It was filled with saloons and honkytonks galore, and cowboys, soldiers on leave, girls and gamblers, citizens on a spree, were thronging the muddy streets. Rigs and horses stood along the hitch-racks, and the sound of music mingled with the shouts of the multitude.

The Fandango, largest, roughest of the many saloons, was the resort for which Indian Wells headed. He dropped the reins of his mustang over the railing and walked into the square dance-hall annex. Then the Rio Kid left Saber and went up on the porch.

"There Wells is, lookin' for somebody," Bob Pryor muttered, as he saw the breed pause inside, near the front of the saloon and inspect the patrons with his dark eyes.

The Fandango's bar was large and ornate, just the thing to please the fancy of men who had been immured long weeks on the lonely range or in wilderness mines. Sawdust covered the floor, and the brass spittoons sparkled in the bright light of big, hanging oil lamps. A bar ran the full length of the huge room. There was a mirror behind it, and shelves laden with glasses, bottles and glassware. A dozen bartenders were busy serving the crowd. Hobnailed boots shook the building.

Indian Wells moved down the room, threading his way through the knots of carousing men. A figure appeared at a rear doorway, and the Rio Kid felt a surge of excitement as he realized that his hunch had worked out.

"There's Cud Murphy," he thought. "And Davis can't be far away."

Indian Wells had caught Murphy's eye, and Cud gave a quick nod, turned and disappeared in the back hall. Indian Wells swiftly glided after him. Then the Rio Kid entered a side alley which he had noticed on one side of the Fandango.

He tiptoed along it, listening, trying to sift significant sounds from the welter of noise. It took him several minutes to locate the room in which Indian Wells and Cud Murphy had holed up, but the windows were open in the spring warmth

and he caught a voice that he knew.

"—You mean Red Cloud failed?"

Flash Davis was in there. Peeking in at the corner of the window, the Rio Kid saw Davis who, scowling, was seated at a round table with a drink in front of him. Davis had on new, fine clothing, for Red Cloud's furs and gold had given him a new start.

"Uh-huh, Rio Kid got dere ahaid of us," growled Indian Wells. "Carrington come down wid sojers and chased us off."

DAVIS was furious.

"Cuss them, they're lucky as horseshoes!" he exclaimed. "I expected to be sellin' stock in Snake Creek diggings by this time! The Rio Kid! I'd like to see him boiled in oil."

"De chief say he buy de guns, though," said Indian Wells. "He must have dem."

"He'll pay full price, now," grunted Flash Davis, drumming with his blunt fingers on the table.

Indian Wells nodded. "Shore, de chief pay," he promised. "Plenty furs, plenty hides, plenty gold, too. When we get guns, de Blackfoot and Arapahoes go to war, too."

"And then?"

"We wipe out Carrington and Fort Kearney."

"*Bueno.*" Flash Davis turned it over in his quick mind. With Fort Kearney abandoned, no whites could remain in the north Wyoming territory without Red Cloud's permission. "I'll own Snake Creek then," he said to himself. "I can trick Red Cloud, too, later."

"You show me rifles, and I tell Chief," suggested Indian Wells.

"Certainly, Wells. But they're all fine rifles, just as good as the thousand I delivered. I'll have to make several trips with our wagons to move 'em up to you, though. Not everybody can be trusted with such a job."

He knew that Indian Wells' account of the new guns would make Red Cloud's mouth water, and this would hurry the final payment. His Washington connections had grown impatient at his delay in disposing of the weapons, and he needed the profit that he would gain from it.

"We go now?" inquired Indian Wells, impatient to be moving. He did not like the inside of buildings. He had been brought up in a Sioux tepee, although as a boy he had lived at a trading post where he had learned the ways of the white man.

"Yes, it's as good a time as any. In the mornin' I'll get my mule-skinners on the job and start moving the stuff north."

CHAPTER XV

Death Guns

QUIETLY the Rio Kid faded back from the window and made his way through the side passage to the street.

"If Red Cloud gets those rifles it'll mean the devil to pay," he said to himself. "I must find some way of stopping the deal."

Now he knew all about Flash Davis. The man had come to Wyoming to meet Red Cloud and sell weapons to the Sioux. He had been behind most of the troubles the white men had experienced, at the fort and the little mining settlement of Carrington. And here Davis was, at it still, placing modern rifles in the hands of hostile savages.

Pryor signaled Celestino, who came over with Portugee Phillips. Quickly, the Rio Kid outlined the situation.

"We're goin' to take Flash Davis, Indian Wells, and those guns, boys. Colonel Carrington'll back us up on it and so'll any decent citizen. The colonel is back at the fort so the job's up to us."

"That's the stuff," nodded Portugee. "Let's get goin'."

"We'll trail Flash to the spot where he has 'em stored, and then we'll strike. Careful, now! Don't let 'em see yuh."

As a precaution, the Rio Kid sent the Mexican around to the rear of the Fandango. It was fortunate that he did so, for Flash Davis, Indian Wells and Cud Murphy went out the back way. Mireles hurried to signal the Rio Kid, and Portugee slid after Pryor and Mireles as they moved through the side passage to the rear street.

"Which way?" whispered the Rio Kid.

Celestino pointed.

The Rio Kid took the lead, a shadow flitting through the spattered light of the back street. Shafts of illumination came from the rear windows of honky-

tonks, and the faint sounds of the pursuers were drowned in the babble of noises dominating Cheyenne. Piles of rusty, evil-smelling tin cans, over which swarms of insects hovered in the daytime, lay in the backyards of the saloons and restaurants. Shadows from stables and outhouses helped cover the Rio Kid as he trailed Flash Davis and his men.

It wasn't far to the warehouse where the rifles were stored. Davis and his two cronies turned right, and cut across a vacant lot to the bank of the creek, and there loomed ahead the dim, squarish shape of the building.

The Rio Kid threw himself flat. Portugee and Mireles sank down fifty yards to the rear. They watched Flash Davis produce a key and unlock a padlock on a side door. The three renegades entered and shut the door after them.

"*S-s-s-t!*" The Rio Kid signaled his friends up, and they tiptoed to the entry.

He could hear the low murmur of voices inside, as Flash Davis spoke with Indian Wells.

"Now for it," the Rio Kid whispered, and put a hand to the door.

THEY lighted a lantern and the rays of it gave enough illumination to see the cobwebby, barn-like interior of the warehouse. Big rafters ran across from wall to wall. On the rough floor stood case after case, wooden boxes made of thick boards and carefully sealed. Some were marked, "Ploughs." Others had labels describing the contents as "Farm Machinery," or "Scythe Blades."

The piles made it possible for the Rio Kid, on his hands and knees, to creep close up on Flash Davis who was leading Indian Wells on a tour of inspection. Cud Murphy, Davis' faithful shadow, was beside his boss.

"Open up a couple of boxes for him, Cud," ordered Davis. "Let him see what we got."

Cud Murphy had a chisel and blacksmith's hammer. He drove the edge of the chisel under the nailed top, and the wrenching creaks as he pried it open gave the Rio Kid an opportunity to move around the intervening pile of boxes and rise up within a few feet of the renegades.

Indian Wells was peering into the box. "Fine, fine," he grunted. "Red Cloud pay—"

"Reach!" snapped the Rio Kid.

His incisive voice gave them a terrific jolt. Davis, whose nerves had suffered lately, jumped inches off the ground. His dark eyes widened with alarm.

Celestino Mireles and Portugee Phillips jumped to their feet, also. Like their leader, the Rio Kid, they leveled their Colts at the three outlaws in the narrow aisle between the piles of boxes. Indian Wells was nearest the Rio Kid and his mates, with Cud Murphy, half-turned, between the breed and Flash Davis.

Wells was not the sort who would surrender. His Indian training, his fierce Sioux blood, made tame submission impossible.

With a snarl he dropped to his knee and his six-gun rose, thundering at the Rio Kid.

Bob Pryor felt the slug breathe close to his left cheek. Mireles gave a sharp cry, and the Rio Kid knew that his friend had been hit. Portugee leaped to one side, to get into better firing position, but the Rio Kid's Colt already had spoken. Indian Wells fired a second shot. But it drilled into the floor of the warehouse, the explosions echoing hollowly in the big building.

"Stand!" shouted Portugee Phillips. A moment later he snapped his hammer.

Cud Murphy had moved. As Indian Wells made his fight, Flash Davis had chanced a headlong dive through a narrow aisle between the high piles of boxes only a yard from his position. Taking advantage of the breed's attempt to win freedom, leaving Cud Murphy to his fate, Flash Davis ducked away.

The Rio Kid was running in. Indian Wells was down, his black eyes glazing, his pistol lying a foot from his clawed hand.

Cud Murphy, his ugly face ablaze with fury, had his gun out and up, but Portugee's first slug cut him through the shoulder, spinning him half-around. Murphy tried to get his pistol into action again but the Rio Kid's follower smacked him over the head with the barrel of the Colt and Murphy went down heavily, falling against the lantern. The little flame suddenly went out, plunging the big warehouse in blackness.

"Go 'round the other way, pronto, Portugee," called the Rio Kid.

He had to take Flash Davis. The maliciousness of the man had become plain,

now he realized Davis' real purpose in coming to Wyoming.

Pryor struck a match, crouched close against the pile of boxes. The lantern lay on its side, smoking hot. Seizing the wire handle, he pulled the lantern out of sight to light it again, for he must find Davis before the man escaped in the night.

A bullet smacked into the glass chimney, shattering it, and spattering the Rio Kid with hot bits of flying glass. He cursed with pain, but drew back and touched his match to the wet wick. It gave enough wavering yellow light to see by, and he set it on the floor, and crawled to the aisle down which Davis had run.

"You got that other side covered, Portugee?" he shouted, his voice echoing in the empty upper spaces of the warehouse.

"I'm here, Rio Kid!"

"Come out, Flash. The jig's up," called the Rio Kid.

He pulled off a boot, stuck its toe past the edge of the pile of rifle boxes. A bullet ripped the leather, tore the boot out of his fingers. Davis was several yards down the narrow aisle.

It was death to show against that space. Davis would get him the instant he appeared.

MIRELES was lying back there. The Rio Kid didn't know how badly his Mexican trail-mate was hit. He was in a hurry to finish Davis and help his friend. He rose up, got his fingers on the top box and pulled himself up. Crawling across the ten-foot-high piles, he reached approximately the spot where he figured Flash Davis was cowering, between the protecting cases.

Portugee Phillips saw the Rio Kid, caught his hand signal. He fired a couple of shots into the aisle, and yelled. He drew a slug from Flash, and it placed Davis for Pryor exactly. The Rio Kid threw himself forward, still flat, his Colt in his right hand, and stuck his head and shoulders over the space. Flash Davis, diverted by Portugee's play, was facing the other way, and the Rio Kid covered him.

"Drop it, Davis! I got yuh!" he shouted.

Flash Davis let go of his Colt as though it had suddenly grown red hot. His hands flew overhead, for he could tell by the sound of Pryor's voice that the Rio Kid was almost upon his back. "Turn 'round and walk out—slow and careful," ordered the Rio Kid.

Davis obeyed. His lip was bitten between his white teeth and a muscle twitched in his cheek. The Rio Kid, on his feet, followed him to the wider aisle, and jumped to the ground, gun always ready.

"What—what you mean to do with me, Rio Kid?" quavered Flash Davis.

His eyes flickered as he met the square, triumphant gaze of the Rio Kid.

"I'll take yuh back to Snake Creek, I reckon, and let 'em try yuh ag'in, Flash. When they hear it was you who sent the Sioux after 'em, I don't believe they'll let yuh off with tar and feathers this time. Colonel Carrington'd be mighty glad to have yuh, too, when he learns 'bout these guns and yore doin's."

Flash Davis knew what he faced. The verdict would be death. Back East, he might snake out of charges with the aid of a clever lawyer, but he could never escape the just punishment that the prospectors would mete out to him.

"All right, Rio Kid," he said submissively, "I'll go."

He half-turned to hide the whip draw which he made from his hidden shoulder holster, where he carried a spare gun for just such contingencies. As he came around again, he fired, his face twisted with mad rage.

But even as he shot, he knew he was done. A high-pitched scream rose in his throat. The Rio Kid wasn't where he should have been. He had jumped aside, his back against the wall of boxes, and Davis stared for a moment into the black, deadly eye of Pryor's Colt.

It flashed and exploded. The slug, directed by the cool-brained, steady Rio Kid, drilled between Flash Davis' burning eyes, and then it was over.

Knowing Davis was dead, the Rio Kid ran back to Celestino Mireles. His Mexican friend had been hit in the head and, for an instant, Pryor feared he also was dead. To the scout's intense relief, he found that Indian Wells' bullet had only creased the Mexican's scalp, stunning him.

Portugee hurried to his friend's side. "What now, Rio Kid?"

"C'mon. We'll fix up the boy, and then

we'll see these cases of rifles are taken care of. Colonel Carrington'll be mighty glad to find out the Injuns are due for a big disappointment."

THE August day was warm and beautiful in the north Wyoming land. The wilderness was lovely with its thick summer foliage, the trees filled with trilling songbirds, and the forest paths with deer and other wild things. The streams ran free in their rocky beds, and there was an air of brooding peace over the scene. But bugles, military notes, broke the spell, and Colonel Henry Carrington nodded his head.

Strident officer voices rang out their orders, and cavalry guidons came erect.

"For-ward, Mar-ch!"

The bugle repeated the command. Orderly columns of troops and wagons, driven by civilians, moved out of the stockade, southeast on the Bozeman Trail.

Bitterly, Colonel Carrington looked for a last time on the fort, Fort Phil Kearney, which he had built at the cost of such tribulation and bloodshed, paying in the lives of men he had liked and trusted.

Fetterman's ghost and the shades of two hundred other dead men lined up in ranks, as though reproachfully to watch that withdrawal. All the things for which they had sacrificed themselves, was thus abandoned, abandoned to the enemy, Red Cloud and the Sioux.

Carrington sat his big charger, watching. His columns moved past. Up ahead were covered wagons carrying out Dave Harrison and his Snake Creek friends, Van Weber and his bride, Dora. Most of them had done well at the Rio Kid's gold strike, and were carrying out tidy fortunes in gold. But now the settlement had to be abandoned, with Fort Kearney no longer in action.

Carrington could feel bitterness to the full. "Good-by, boys," he murmured, almost soundlessly. He was taking his leave of the brave ones who had died to hold the fort.

The Rio Kid, bringing up the rear, the point of danger, pulled up the dun close to his friend.

"Comin', sir?"

"Yes, Rio Kid."

The Rio Kid knew what Carrington was going through. He felt the same way himself. "Orders are orders, Colonel."

"Yes—orders are orders, Rio Kid."

He tried to keep the glumness from his voice. For two years, Carrington, the Rio Kid, Portugee and the rest had bravely held Fort Phil Kearney, protecting the Bozeman Trail. Lack of support, politics back East, the inertia and carelessness, even the machinations of men who wished to see the Indians remain strong for their own gain, had defeated them, rather than anything the physical foe could produce.

Red Cloud was but a symbol of those forces. The great Sioux Chief fought fairly and skillfully in his own light. Carrington and the Rio Kid felt no hatred for Red Cloud and his men.

As they watched, they saw an Indian appear on a rise to the west. He had been observing the abandonment of Fort Phil Kearney. "That's Red Cloud, sir," said the Rio Kid.

The marching columns, silent save for the creak of saddle leather and the scrape of equipment, were moving on.

More and more Sioux appeared. Savage howls reached them on the soft summer wind, as the Indians sang a pæan of warrior triumph. The soldiers were still in sight when Red Cloud moved in.

The great chief himself, whose strategy and fighting powers and bulldog determination had at last triumphed over the white men he so hated, set the torch to the fort. Smoke was rising over the stockade, as the buildings were lighted and the Sioux began their war dance.

The Sioux were mighty. It would yet be a long decade before they would reach the peak of their power, killing Custer and all his men in the greatest of massacres.

Carrington and the Rio Kid watched the flames stonily.

Then the Rio Kid raised his carbine in one hand, over his head.

"We'll be back!" he said.

The danger trails called, and through the years the Rio Kid would ride, fighting the fair fight.

Coming Next Issue: LORD OF THE SILVER LODE, an exciting complete Rio Kid novel by LEE E. WELLS

Bound for the Owlhoot

By JACK STERRETT

THE yellow hills which first had turned gray with the dusk now were silver beneath a moon that roamed beyond a thin corral of clouds. Here and there, boulder outcroppings and thickets of black-jack oak were as black as ink. The hills shouldered together and folded, one behind the other, and at the bottom of the folds the dirt highway wound in and out, a shadowy thread of white dust from the pinnacle where Will Garret sat in his saddle, watching.

Tall and slim, as square-cut and flat as a shape sawed from a board, young Garret finished his third cigarette, then knotted his black handkerchief over the high, thin bridge of his nose and loosened his .45 in its holster. The Coldwater stage was about due.

As he slanted down the hill toward the road he thought he heard a queer sound, listened intently, then shrugged. He had been up here half an hour and was sure he had not been followed. Nobody but "Raus" Ryan had known he was coming. That sound? Nothing but the muted bark of a startled coyote.

Will Garret figured he had a right to hold up the Coldwater stage. Usually, Jack Rees left the cowtown of Hobbville for Coldwater on this midnight run

Garret had reached his horse and stormed away before the other man could shoot

A sheriff and his son prove too much for a passel of ornery lobos!

with a stage empty of anything except a few sacks of mail. It was a gloomy run, avoided by the passenger business. But tonight, Garret knew, Rees' strong-box held a big bundle of cash money which was being sent out by Charley Dill.

And Dill had as good as stolen that money—from Will and his old dad, Eph Garret.

Will began to sweat a little, and the palms of his hands were moist, as he heard the rumble of the stage in the distance. He lit the lantern he had brought and placed it in the road where its rays would disclose the rope he had strung across from one scrub oak to another. Back from sight behind a pile of boulders, he hunkered and waited. He hoped wholeheartedly that Jack Rees wouldn't show fight.

The stage-coach came boiling around the bend, swaying and rocking in the headlong manner of Rees' usual way of driving. Jack Rees saw the rope and yelled. He was frantically sawing on the reins and bringing his team to a staggering halt, bare inches from the rope when Will Garret swarmed up over the off wheel and dragged him from the seat.

There was a short, sharp struggle. But the elements of surprise, youth and strength were on Garret's side. Rees was pummeled and beaten down, his six-gun jerked from its holster and flung aside.

BREATHING heavily, Garret stared down at the gray-haired man with the stringy, soup-strainer mustache. He readjusted the black handkerchief over his face and disguised his voice.

"Sorry I had to throw yuh, Jack," he muttered. "Couldn't take a chance on stoppin' yore lead. Get up and hand me the key to the strong-box."

"You go to thunder!" the driver yelped furiously.

"You get up." Garret's voice held a menacing rasp. "And hand 'em to me, or I'll brain yuh with my gun and help myself!"

Jack Rees climbed to his feet. He was a wiry and tough little man, and quick as a cat. But, though Garret watched him warily, he made no wrong move. He fished slowly through his pockets for the key to the leather-covered, oak-and-iron-bound boot. And Will Garret read a strange, sorrowing expression on the little man's face as the keen gray eyes probed toward him through the half-dark.

"Will—Will Garret—this'll be a blow to yore old dad," he mumbled. "I wouldn't believe them hobos when they told me yuh planned this hold-up. I told 'em they lied in their teeth, and refused to let 'em hide in the stage as they wanted so's they could trap yuh. Will! Will! You bound for the owlhoot? You still worshippin' the wild hellion existence yore old dad used to lead and which he's worked hard for twenty years to live down? Boy! Tell me this ain't true. Tell me yuh only stopped me to warn me of an attempt at hold-up somewheres else. Turn around and walk away from me in the dark now, Will. Get on yore horse and ride so's I can forget—for yore dad's sake—that I ever saw yuh here!"

Will Garret's body had jerked to rigid paralysis at Rees' first words. Mind reeling, he heard the old driver through. When the little man finished he was trembling like a wild stallion snubbed down to a post, poised on the edge of bolting the instant his head was freed.

A groaning curse burst from his lips. "Jack, by glory—who told yuh I planned this thing?" Red filmed his gaze as he thought who it might have been, and he cursed wildly and clutched the staghorn butt of his big six-gun. "Speak up, man—speak!"

"That won't be needful," a hard and ugly voice drawled harshly through the dark. "Will Garret, empty yore hand and push yore naked paws straight up in the air. We've got yuh ringed around with rifles plumb thirsty for yore blood."

Cold fear and fury swept through young Garret, leaving him for an instant lax and weak. He could hear that snarling voice continuing its drawl. Now he knew what the sound was he had heard a while back. The coughing of a horse in the next fold in the hills. He knew the owner of that mean voice. Raus Ryan.

Ryan—who had urged him into this hold-up!

"Yuh believin' us now, Rees?" Ryan was snarling out of the dark. "This young helion's takin' off right where his dad quit twenty years ago—if he ever did quit. They're two of a kind. Once outlaws, always outlaws." The voice broke off harshly. "Will, why ain't yore

hands in the air? By the eternal, you try anything—"

But Will Garret was already trying, trying savagely and desperately with the blinding speed of which he was capable to slash his six-gun into action, to whirl, duck and storm headlong to where his horse stood rein-tied in the dark.

THE dark was ripped, torn crisscross by savage lances of flame, and as Garret whirled away, untouched, blasting lead at the blossoming sources of those flames he heard a scream and recognized it as coming from the throat of old Jack Rees. And he swore brokenly, sprawling across the boulders to reach his horse.

That was Rees' death scream! Somebody's slug had finished him. Not his own, he prayed.

"Cut him off!" Raus Ryan was roaring. "Get between him and his hoss, yuh fools!"

One man succeeded in the move. Will Garret saw his white face in the pale murk of the overcast moon for an instant. The man was a stranger. He was crouched and bringing up his rifle to shoot.

Garret flicked around the barrel of his .45 and squeezed.

The lead blotted out the white face, knocked the stranger rolling backward in a crazy lump.

In two more bounds Garret had reached his horse and saddle as another man came racing toward him, gun up. Garret whirled and stormed away on the dead run into which his willing animal leaped before the man could shoot. The wild, directionless lead which bored spitefully through the dark died away and gave up its senseless searching. But he could still hear Ryan's voice bawling. And even through the roar of his own gelding's hoofs, he heard the sudden drumming of mad pursuit.

Inside the hour, young Garrett shook them and lost them for good. He knew these hills, he figured, a little better than almost any other man did. For their wild and rolling tangle of sweet, grassy swells and botatoms, of brush-choked draws and gulches had once all belonged to his dad and himself—the G Double spread.

It had been a ranch old Eph Garret had spent the most of twenty years in building out of his blood and sweat

It had been the happy roaming place of Will, from his motherless childhood on up.

Until last year. Last year Charley Dill had refused to extend Eph Garret's notes. He had foreclosed the mortgage the day after it was due and blasted the lives of Eph and Will, his son. Just recently, Dill had made a killing, selling off a whacking big herd to a wealthy speculator who had brought in his own crew to drive the stock away.

It was that cash money which had been going out to the bank in the railhead town of Coldwater. It was that money that hot and wild-headed Will Garret had determined to hold up when Raus Ryan had whispered to him the secret of its going. The tempestuous way he looked at it, the money had as good as been stolen from his dad. The grasping, land-bloated Dill had had no right to it. It had been earned by twenty years of blood and toil.

Alone, now, in the dark of the hills, Will Garret rode aimlessly and without hurry. He had things to straighten in his mind. He was badly shaken by the death of Jack Rees. For that Rees had died, he did not doubt. Nor did he doubt that he would, himself, be blamed for that killing, as well as for the death of the stranger who had tried to stop him.

Old Jack Rees was dead—and it was his fault! If he hadn't taken that insane notion to hold up the stage Rees would be alive and happy this minute. The little man's blood was on his hands! Garret shuddered and felt sick.

And why? Why? That was the question. Why had Raus Ryan deliberately trapped him, or attempted to? Nobody but Ryan had known that he had been told about the money on the stage. What had been that coyote's game? For, now, Will knew him as a coyote, even though he had for several months considered him crony and friend. Will remembered that his father had always warned him against Raus. He could recall his father's very words.

SON," he had said, "stay away from Raus. Yeah. I *sabe*—he's about yore age and he seems friendly. He's got plenty of *dinero* and he's free with it and generous. Shore, he's good company—when he wants to be. But don't side him too much, feller. I'm tellin'

yuh he's bad." His dad's lean, deep-seamed face had tightened. "I know bad men. I used to run with 'em. There's a look in their eyes, a slant to their mouths and a pinch to their nostrils. Yuh can tell a mean hoss just by lookin' at him, can't yuh? Well, it's that way with this young Ryan. Underneath, he's mean and ugly."

"Dad, yuh're dead wrong," Will had protested, a little hot around the ears. "Yuh've fought against yore wild-headed youth for so many years that yuh've turned into a Puritan. Why I've never even heard yuh swear, or tell a lie. Never seen yuh pull a slick deal—"

"That's enough," his dad had said sternly. "There was too much of all of them things when I was young. I thought such things was smart, then. Yeah—I did worse. I killed men. Think of it, son. I took away from 'em the one thing in all the world worth a red cent to 'em—their lives."

He had groaned and, for a moment, his gray face had been a mask of tragic despair.

"Thank God, I met yore mother. Her sweet ways changed me and made a man of me. For her sake, and yores, I've been a man for twenty years. Boy"—his voice had turned suddenly harsh—"if I ever thought for a moment that you might go the way I once did—" He had left the sentence unfinished. "Quit Raus Ryan and leave him to run his own course."

Will Garret was desperately sorry now that he hadn't. As he figured the consequences which had come as a result of his failure to heed his father's advice, his heart burned. Jack Rees was dead. He, Will Garret, was a candidate for a hemp rope hanging. And his own father—

Young Garret groaned aloud.

Following the loss of his ranch to Charley Dill, his dad had turned his hand to every honest job that would feed him. Finally, he had been induced by square-shooting friends to run for sheriff. It was an office which, in this county, had badly needed filling by an upright and honest man. Three months ago Eph Garret had been elected over the violent opposition of the voters who had sided with Charley Dill. There had been a deal of name-calling. The paunchy, lizard-eyed Dill had not hesitated to use Garret's past openly against him. But Garret's record for the twenty years which had followed those youthful mistakes had been enough for his supporters.

Now—

Will shivered as the true picture struck him. Now, Eph Garret would be ruined and debased, his name made the plaything of vicious mockery, if he did not arrest his own son and see to his hanging! And that was the plot. Raus Ryan had been hired by Dill's ugly and bitter crowd to lead wild-headed young Will Garret deliberately into the trap he had sprung this night.

As he understood at last, Will Garret was stunned and sickened. And by slow degrees, he burned to a steadily mounting fury. Then, at last, he headed straight for home—straight for Hobbville and the little shack on its outskirts where he and his dad had been living. He had not been there for the last several nights, for fear his father might read his wild plan in his eyes.

He sloped down from the hills toward the town, lying in an open valley, as cautiously and silently as a ghost headed for a haunting. He picked the hidden ways. Nearing the outskirts of the county seat, he rode on the far side of Hobb Creek, placing the willows and sycamores between his going and the lights of the village.

When at last he thrust his way gently through the thickets, he halted a bare hundred yards from his father's small house.

And what he saw, held him there for long minutes.

THE house was blazing with light. A dozen cow ponies stamped impatiently in the yard.

Will Garret had to know what went on. He left his horse rein-tied in the brush, and crept up on the house through the shadows. Crouched below a lighted window, he listened to the voices within. He dared not risk straightening to have a look inside. He didn't need to in order to form a picture of the scene. In his mind's eye, it was all clear enough.

His dad, Eph Garret, would be standing with his back to the stove, facing the room. Tall and flat and square, his mouth the straight thin line of determination and honesty, grimly gray eyes and gray hair, his rugged jaw and nose harsh and

forbidding. Unafraid, unflinching in the face of his duty, no matter what.

That was the picture. A fearless lion of a man facing a pack of wolves, the flashing recklessness and readiness still in him that had made him a hellion as a youth, but tempered now and sternly in the hand of an iron will.

And that huddle of nervous and accusing men facing his father. Yes, they were wolves. All but two or three—because Raus Ryan and Charley Dill would have been smart enough to bring several square and honest cattlemen with them to hear their accusations and witness the tall sheriff's reactions.

Then, gradually, young Garret became aware of a strange thing. The room was filled with an ugly, low turmoil. The yapping and snarling of the wolves was there. But not the slow, measured tones of the lion. The picture he had conjured in his mind was incomplete. It was not all as he had imagined. Because his father was not there!

Incautiously, in his surprise, he raised to look inside. The light shone square into his face and a man inside, a man with lizard eyes and features as loose and hanging as dirty, folded cloth, was staring straight at him. The man's mouth flipped open. He yelled. And at the same instant, Will Garret heard a sound behind him, the scraping of a booted foot across hard earth.

He ducked and whirled to leap away. Something slammed down like a crushing weight on the side of his skull and he plunged into black senselessness. . . .

When the light came on again, it was just a single light, murky yellow, fly-specked and dim. He saw it through bars and it was some time, as he lay on his back and stared at it dazedly, before he realized that it was the light in the hallway of the short cell-block in Hobbville jail. He was lying on his back on a cot in one of those cells and all the pain in the world was in his throbbing skull. He groaned and rolled on his side. And saw his father.

Eph Garret sat across the cell on the narrow bench that was screwed to the wall. His big Fontie-model Colt lay on the bench beside him and he was rolling a cigarette. He looked up when his son groaned and his gray eyes were quiet and still as he regarded him. Slowly he finished his cigarette, thrust it between the lips of his strong mouth and lit it. He allowed the smoke to trickle from the nostrils of his craggy beak.

"Well, son?"

Will jerked upright explosively, then grabbed his head in both hands and sat down suddenly. No sound came from his white lips, but the sweat of agony was on his forehead as he overcame the pain and looked up again.

"Dad!" His words made little sense, their tone expressed everything. "They got me!"

"Yeah," Eph Garret nodded grimly. "One way or another, they usually do. Yuh pulled a crazy-headed stunt. Yuh deserved to get caught."

"They've told yuh—"

"Everything." The sheriff nodded. "I just got back to town a half-hour ago. There's quite a mob formed, son. Mebbe it's lucky I come just when I did. A couple of the boys—Ralph Jones, Rod Howard—helped me tone 'em down. I got 'em to let me lock yuh up. I made 'em go out so's I could talk to yuh. But they've got the place surrounded. And mebbe, in spite of anything I can do, they'll hang yuh tonight." He paused, his face as gray as granite. "Yuh want to tell me all about it?"

WILL told him. He was bitter with remorse. He spared himself nothing.

"Dad, I've ruined yuh! If I'd had any sense, I'd have killed myself first."

"There was a time"—his father nodded—"when I didn't figger I was fit to live. I'd been such a skunk. So I know how you feel. But a feller's entitled to a mistake or two—provided he makes a man of hisself and lives 'em down. Provided he'll learn what's right and not go on bein' wrong-headed. The only thing is"—and his heavy weariness and sorrow showed through—"it don't look like yuh'll have the chance to make another mistake, or to set right what yuh've done."

"I've told yuh it was all a trap!" Will insisted wildly.

Eph nodded. "And I believe yuh. I have reason to know the men that roped yuh in, and the way they work. But the fact remains that yuh held up the stage and can't say yuh didn't. And the fact remains that Jack Rees died as a

result. Yuh won't be able to convince many—not even honest men—that yuh didn't fire the shot that did it."

Will sank back in black despair. He could hear the mob outside, its ceaseless turmoil, its yapping and snarling. It was a big crowd and an ugly one. It would give his dad only so much time. And what could be done with that time? Nothing!

The front of the jail was already beginning to echo to the thunder of heavy fists against the barred office door. Eph Garret's head turned that way, then suddenly whipped back with swift and harsh decision. All his slowness and regret were gone, replaced by a grim readiness for violence that was shocking for Will to see. Only once before had he seen his father look like that—when he had horsewhipped a lowlife cowboy for kicking a horse in the belly.

"We got but one thin thread of hope, boy, and by heaven that's enough for me!" the sheriff ground out. "You follow me, now, and do what I say. If violence should come, you side with me and we'll play out our hands like men."

He picked up his Colt and tossed it. Will caught it with a sense of stunned astonishment. This was the last thing he had expected—that his father would arm him.

Eph Garret walked out of the unlocked cell and Will followed him numbly to the front office, a square and bare room of about twelve by twelve, furnished only with his father's desk and chair and benches which ran around the walls. Will saw that his father had another six-gun laid out to hand on his desk. He saw the door straining and shaking against its bar as the mob pounded it.

Eph ignored the pounding. He lifted a poster from his desk and displayed it.

"Yuh know this man, Will?"

Will stared. "I shot him tonight. That's the rifle-totin' killer who tried to stop me at the hold-up!"

"He's a bank-robbin' murderer—or was. I had a call to a law officers' council at Coldwater and this thing was handed me there. I brought it back with me, tonight, and nobody in Hobbville knows about it but you and me. Son," —he leaned forward and his face was set and tense—"I didn't arm yuh to give you a chance to escape justice or make a fight for yore life. You know me better. Yuh was bound for the owlhoot and I'd a hung yuh before I allowed yuh to hit that trail. But there's bigger stakes in the game tonight. If yuh help me win 'em, there's the chance the law and the popular opinion of this community mebbe will see fit to pardon yuh. Boy —we're square in the middle of a chance to break up the worst gang of killers, robbers and rustlers in the history of this state!"

Will felt his father's excitement. It caught him.

"Wh—what do yuh want me to do?" he stuttered.

"Hide that gun in yore shirt and set to one side. The last thing anybody'll expect is that yuh'll be armed. Yuh'll sit tight and say nothing except when directly questioned and then yuh'll give a straight answer. Yuh'll use that gun only if it's necessary to help me in what yuh'll find I'm tryin' to do. If yuh go wrong-headed again and use it for an attempt at escape, I swear I'll bring yuh down myself. Yuh savvy?"

"I savvy." Will's lips were white and thin. "I've made my last lawbreak, Dad. If I escape the noose, I'll do it legal. And if I die tonight I'll do it on the side of the law. I don't know what yuh're doin' but I'm with yuh."

THERE was a light then in Eph Garret's eyes that sent warmth clear through Will's heart. Will turned, crossed the room and sat down. The Colt, inside his shirt, was out of sight.

With his foot braced against the door, Eph Garret opened it a crack, and the shouting of the crowd died down as his voice was heard.

"Will is conscious, now," the sheriff announced. "We can take his testimony. But I ain't lettin' in a whole crowd to take the law into their own hands. If Will's to hang it'll be done to him in a lawlike way and I'll give my promise to that. Charley Dill, you and Raus Ryan have a right in here to state what happened and what yuh saw. Ralph Jones and Rod Howard, you two've been keepin' a level head on yuh. You two'll come in to pass judgment on what's said."

There was a growl from the crowd, a deep and ugly sound which brought Will's heart into his throat. But steadier voices cried down the reckless yells for

lynch violence, and Eph Garret's big six-gun, as he stood in the crack of the door, was a potent pacifier. With surly and scowling looks, Raus Ryan and Charley Dill entered, to be followed by Ralph Jones and Rod Howard.

Dill was the man who had spotted Will through the window of his father's house—a man short and paunchy, lizard-eyed and dirty-gray and sagging of features. Ryan was about Will's age, thin and nervous, with curly black hair and hatchet features. Jones and Howard, middle-aged, were as grim, fair and square in every line of stocky bodies and faces as their innermost characters. Their eyes were hard, but not mean.

Jones and Howard sat aside from Ryan and Dill in a manner which bespoke their dislike for the two. Eph Garret was in one corner of the room, at his desk, Will in another, and the four other men by twos in the remaining two corners.

Dill and Ryan did not look as though they relished the situation. Dill's lizard-like gaze glittered nastily and fixedly on Will Garret, and Ryan's narrow, nervous hands were shaking.

"Well"—Dill's voice rasped like a bullfrog's—"let's get along with it. That dirty killer looks well enough. Let him start his lyin'."

Eph shook his head. "Law procedure calls for a statement of the charges and the evidence to back 'em. The defendant is entitled to make an answer instead of a preliminary statement."

"Yuh'd get him out of this fix if yuh could—but yuh can't," Dill snarled nastily. "Too many saw what happened. All right—Will Garret was heard to say he intended to hold up the Coldwater stage and rob its boot of a sum of money I was shippin' down to the bank. Gray Canyon on the far edge of G Double Ranch was thought to be the spot he'd be likely to make that hold-up attempt, and a party of men, including Ralph Jones and Rod Howard"—Dill flickered a look toward those two silent men—"arranged to be there and see if the prisoner's intent was put into action.

"The prisoner," Dill grated, "made certain preparations for the hold-up which should have been enough to cause his arrest on the instant, but Jones and Howard argued that he might have almost any other reason than hold-up for stoppin' the stage. They argued that he was good friends with Jack Rees. They refused to believe that he meant any violence."

Dill's look at those two, now, was accusing and mean.

"They bear part of the blame for Jack's death by refusin' to listen to us!"

Howard's thin, hard lips parted briefly. "It didn't take much arguin' to convince yuh we was right," he said. "I reckon yuh wanted that hold-up to go all the way."

DILL's folded features writhed in a grimace. He shrugged his shoulders.

"It don't matter. We give Will Garret the benefit of all possible doubt. When he had stopped the stage and smashed Jack Rees to the ground, it was plain he meant to kill Jack the minute he got the key from him. We lost no time in jumpin' him. But he shot poor Jack anyway, before we could get to him. Also he killed Ben Barber. He got away from us in the dark, but we caught him later at yore house, Sheriff, just before yuh got home. That's the whole of it—and it's plenty." He jerked his head. "That crowd out there wants action and it'll have it before this night's out."

Eph Garret's eyes swung slowly to Rod Howard and Jones.

"You boys backin' up that statement?"

"Them are the facts, Eph." Howard spoke the words with grim regret. "We saw it all happen."

"Now let the whelp lie, and—" Dill began nastily.

"Just a minute." Eph's gaze stabbed toward Ryan, who had remained nervously silent. "It seems there was events which led up to the hold-up. From what I've heard, Ryan has the know on them. Better make yore statement now, Raus."

Raus cleared his throat. His black eyes were shifty and they avoided Will. "Will Garret and I," he said throatily, "used to pard around. I'm surprised at what I ever saw in such a skunk. He was pretty full, night before last, and it was then he told me what he meant to do."

"That's a lie!" Will's words cracked.

Ryan's features purpled with angry blood. His nervous right hand twitched toward his hip.

"Hold it, Ryan!" Eph barked, and touched the Colt lying on the desk before him. He eyed Will. "Yuh want to say more'n that, Will?"

"There ain't much I can say," Will said jerkily, eyes harsh on Raus Ryan. "I done that hold-up. I shot the man they call Ben Barber. I didn't shoot Jack Rees. Jack had no gun and I'm no cold-blooded killer. I didn't tell Raus I was goin' to make that hold-up. He suggested it to me. As Raus says, we'd been pards—barroom pards, and a thing I'm desperately sorry for—for a long time. I had no way of knowin' that the money was goin' out on that stage, just Raus's word for it. But he could see that the idea set well with me. 'Cordin' to him it would be a way of gettin' back all the money that Dill had as good as stole from my dad. He banked on me makin' that hold-up attempt. And he—and Dill—laid a trap for me."

"And that's all a lie!" Ryan snarled savagely. "It was his own idea."

Eph Garret shrugged and looked at Rod Howard and Jones.

"Them seem to be the charges and the answers," he said with slow grimness. "With what you two saw with yore own eyes, the facts are bad enough—bad enough for a hangin' case." The last words had come with an effort and he paused for a moment before continuing. "There's just one thing—a closer look at Jack Rees mebbe will show he was killed by a rifle bullet instead of a six-gun slug."

"Which cuts no ice, Eph," Howard said grimly. "If there'd been no hold-up, there'd been no killin'."

Eph nodded without speaking, his face gray and tragic.

"Eph," Howard said with a scowl at Dill and Ryan, "there was dirty work afoot before that hold-up took place. We know who done it, and we know why. Yore ruination was wanted. But the hold-up *did* take place and Jack Rees *is* dead. Eph, there's nothing we can do but pronounce yore son guilty."

Jones' nod confirmed Howard's verdict.

UGLY grins of triumph split the faces of Dill and Ryan and Will stared anxiously at his father, whose head was sunk forward in brooding tragedy.

"Well," yapped Dill, "yuh goin' to break the news to the crowd?"

"No," said Eph in a voice barely more than a whisper, and as he spoke reached for his Colt and held it lightly in his hand. "Not just yet."

"What!" Dill screamed, and he and Ryan both leaped to their feet in furious protest. But Eph's big six-gun waved them back to their seats on the bench.

"I'm the judge. Yuh're only the jury." Eph's face as he lifted it now was hard as iron and his flashing gray eyes were pinpoints of hardness and danger. "Yuh've given the evidence and passed on it, you four. Yuh've rendered the guilty verdict—but it's up to me to sum up some things and pronounce sentence."

"You try any monkey business, that mob'll take yuh!" Dill howled savagely.

Eph Garret did not seem to have heard his words. His eyes fixed on the man and seemed to bore straight through the features and into the skull behind them.

"How long," he asked quietly, "has yore son, Raus, been goin' by the name of Ryan instead of Dill?"

The shock of the quietly drawled words held the room in stunned silence for a moment. Howard and Jones stared at Ryan and Dill in stark surprise. No sound came from those two. Their faces were white, their eyes suddenly withdrawn and wary. Will's mouth hung open. His heart raced. Those few drawled words began to explain a lot.

"How long," Eph drawled softly, "has Ben Barber, whose real name is Frank Dean, been free of the penitentiary on his manslaughter charge? How long has he been posin' as a wealthy cattle buyer, and where did he get the cash?"

Startled grunts were jerked from Will and his father's two friends. Mouths beginning to twitch and jerk, Dill and Ryan looked still more like cornered rats. Because these words explained and suggested amazingly more.

If Ben Barber, who had been posing as a wealthy cattle buyer and had, supposedly, bought Dill's big herd for a whacking cash price, was not what he seemed, but on the contrary a penniless ex-con—how and why had such a deal ever actually taken place? Had there been any money at all in the boot of that stage? Had not the whole thing been a

fiendishly clever plot to ruin Eph Garret and dispose of his son?

Such thoughts rioted through Will's mind. The fact that Raus was Dill's son, instead of who he had been pretending to be, was the clincher. And Dill had not as yet denied the relationship. By the outraged looks on the faces of the father's friends, Will could see that similar thoughts had thrown them into dreadful uncertainty as to how justice could now be served.

Howard cursed sharply and lunged to his feet with stumbling, angry questions on his lips. And the move was a mistake. For the reason that, for that instant, his square body was between Dill and the sheriff. Will groaned when he saw what happened. He had not had the time to make a move, himself. Dill's gun was out like a lashing snake, his voice roaring.

"Don't anybody move or yuh'll all get killed! Garret, toss that Colt into yore waste-basket or I swear I'll kill Rod Howard! I'll give yuh three counts. One—two—"

IT WAS sheer checkmate. Neither leveled gun could speak a split second before the other and Raus' weapon had come sliding out to side his ugly sire's. With a sigh, Eph Garret dropped his weapon in the basket. At a motion from Dill, Raus moved swiftly to Howard and Jones and disarmed them. Howard's face was flushed and angry.

"Dill," the rancher growled, "you two have taken charge, but not in any lawlike manner. Are yuh goin' to answer the sheriff's questions?"

"No!" Dill snarled. "Why should I? Raus and I ain't on trial. That crowd's waitin' for the kill it has a right to make."

"They might be interested, though," Howard said coldly, "in hearing yore answers to them questions. And they might have a change of heart about who needs killin'."

For the moment, Dill and Raus were murderously uncertain, their eyes darting and their mouths working. Before they could speak, the sheriff's voice took up again with icy smoothness.

"If given the chance," he said, "I believe I can prove a number of things. First, Raus' parentage—by Charley Dill and a Mexican woman named Maria, who holds bitter hatred in her heart for the husband and son who deserted her and left her penniless, years ago. Second—the wife of Banker Babson, in Coldwater, is ready to swear that her husband had speculated with his bank's funds, that he sold Charley Dill the mortgage to my ranch while tryin' to replace them funds, and that he killed himself in a fit of remorse because he knew that Dill intended to foreclose on me at once. Third—the law authorities of Contra County in West Texas are ready to swear that the descriptions of Charley Dill and Raus Ryan fit the ringleaders of a notorious gang of highwaymen and killers wanted under serious charges in that county. Fourth—"

"Stop!"

Dill fairly screamed the word. He and his half-Mexican son were plainly on the verge of killing action. They were caught in the slowly closing steel jaws of a trap of their own making. They could see, frantically, no escape except in murderous gunfire and a wild stampede to erupt from the rear of the jail and get away before the outside crowd could realize what was under way. They teetered on the edge of such explosion, the sweat of fury and panic on their faces. Eph Garret's words dripped coldly and unheedingly.

"Fourth—I can prove that Ben Barber was wanted for the murderin' robbery of the bank in Cinco, New Mexico. So, far from bein' a rich cattle buyer he was an accomplice of Charley Dill's who had escaped from the pen, and the cattle-buying deal was cooked up to furnish a cover for the transfer of a large sum of stole money from this county to a place of safe-keeping.

"The money in the boot of Jack's stage, if not already removed, can be checked. The serial numbers were known, and the denominations of the bills. And here's the proof!"

With a flicker of his wrist, his eyes darting toward Will for an instant, the sheriff picked up and displayed the "wanted" poster that accused Ben Barber and all who had had any dealings with him.

Will caught his father's signal. Just for a split instant, stunned and staring at the poster, Dill and Raus were off-guard. Will flew into action. His hand

darted into his shirt and out with the Frontier-model.

"Hold it, you killers! I've got the drop on yuh!"

His weapon was leveled at them in an iron-hard fist, its hammer back. He was crouched and his eyes flared frosty fire.

BUT there was not a chance that Dill and Raus would meekly drop their weapons. Theirs was the choice of men who would die by gunfire or by a hang-rope noose. And their furious, cursing action was in accordance. They whirled with savage curses and their guns were up. And Will's weapon answered, slug for slug.

When the smoke had cleared, outlaw father and son were a tangled heap of bloody death on the floor and Will Garret was pinned back against the wall. The front of his shirt was bloody and he was slowly sliding down to a sagging spinelessness on the bench.

But even through the welter of his agony, his eyes were seeking his father's. Eph Garret and Ralph Jones leaped to his side and lowered him gently. Rod Howard took one look at the wounds their tender hands disclosed on young Garret's chest, and shook his head. He went out to tell the story to the suddenly silenced crowd.

Will's eyes closed in a spasm of pain, then looked up again into his father's, and they were clear and steady.

"Dad—yuh said—a young feller was entitled—to a mistake or two—if he made up for them."

"Son"—the old man's voice was husky—"yuh've done that—yuh shore have." There was fear in his heart, but he hid it. He let his boy see only the warmth and pride of his smile. "And now, look—just take it easy and relax. We've got another fight on our hands. We're goin' to save yore life. And, together, we'll win that fight, too."

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●

"Don't think I'm goin' to let a cold-blooded murderer get away 'cause blood's thicker'n water," Bob said coldly

BULLET BONDS

By CLIFF WALTERS

When it's showdown time, young Bob Wilson, brand new deputy, proves he's a better lawman than most folks think!

A SLIM young man with erect and fairly broad shoulders, Bob Wilson was very much conscious of the deputy's star adorning his vest for the first time, as he walked up Trailbend's only street and turned in at the general store. He was uncomfortably more aware of that badge when he walked up to the counter, asked for a sack of tobacco, and heard old Alex Loring, the bald, pudgy proprietor call to a trio of store loafers:

"Well, look at the five-pointed hardware, boys! Ain't that purty?"

"It shore is," agreed one of the grinning trio. "After a month of hangin' around town, and doin' just enough work so that him and his sorrel horse could eat, Mr. Wilson's roped the job he's been after. After like a wolf on a fat calf's trail."

"Yep," chimed in another. "Oh, it won't last long. Just till the real deputy, Fred Munroe, gets back from tendin' court down at Willowtown." The elderly loafer chuckled. "Still, young Wilson can always say now that he's been an officer of the law. And that he had a county pension for a few days."

The third loafer, big, hulking-shouldered Matt Thorpe, the dark-haired, dark-eyed rancher from Antelope Valley, hadn't done much grinning. His face was unfriendly as he remarked a little thickly—he had just come from the saloon—"What he'd ought to do, if he wanted to earn his wages, would be to go out to Antelope Valley, drag his coyote cousin back here on the end of a rope, and lock the trouble-maker up!"

Bob turned, sized Thorpe up with mild blue eyes.

"Dave Parshall had a pretty good disposition before he moved up to this range," he said. "They didn't used to call him Stormy Parshall. And if there's been trouble out there in a little valley owned by two hostile ranchers, I ain't so sure he made all of it."

"No! No!" scoffed the dark man, a two hundred and twenty-pounder. "Tearin' down a fence that I built around a certain boghole to keep my cattle from dyin' there—*that* ain't makin' trouble, is it?" His lips curled.

"It seems like there was a little mix-up on where that fence material come from," Bob answered. "Accordin' to—"

A spur rowel jingled at the open door. It was Stormy Parshall, almost as broad as Matt Thorpe, but a foot shorter in stature, who stood there, gray eyes flinty.

"That skunk there stole the posts and wire from me," he said, "along with a new pair of wire stretchers. That's why I tore the fence down and took my stuff home."

"Hold on," Bob soothed the irate newcomer.

"Not by a jugful!" snorted his wrathful cousin, a middle-aged bachelor who ran a bunch of horses. "Whenever and wherever I hear this thievin' coyote shootin' off his mouth about me, I'll call his hand with fists, knives or guns. I've lived neighbor to the double-crossin' snake long enough to know that—"

"Call my hand with fists!" bellowed big Matt Thorpe.

He bounded away from the counter against which he had been leaning. Bob Wilson started to move into Thorpe's path, in an effort to prevent a fight. But Thorpe bumped past him and blasted a hard blow to Stormy Parshall's body. Another glancing blow to the face.

Forced into retreat by that furious onslaught, Parshall's spur rowel caught in a loose coil of lariat rope which set near the door, and he almost went down.

Thorpe was quick to press his advantage. He shot a smashing right to Parshall's head, drew that fist back for a shot at the face of his enemy just as Bob Wilson yelled:

"No more of that, Thorpe!"

Thorpe glanced around, saw that star on Bob Wilson's vest and the look in the young man's eyes. Thorpe didn't throw the punch he had intended to unleash.

"I s'pose yuh'll throw me in jail," he said.

"Maybe I will!" Bob clicked. "Maybe I'll throw you both in jail."

"And to save your dear cousin from a beatin'!" Thorpe growled, backing up. "If yuh wasn't wearin' that tin badge, I'd take you and yore coyote cousin out in the street. Beat yuh both up at the same time!"

"Since I *am* wearin' the tin star, and since yuh're too mad and full of red-eye to know what's good for yuh, we'll call off the fightin'," Bob decreed calmly. "Get out of town, Thorpe. And now!"

Mumbling, swearing under his breath, Thorpe grabbed up his fallen hat, jammed it down on his dark, shaggy head and strode out the door. On the store porch, he turned and rumbled, "I'll see yuh out in the valley, Parshall!"

"Good!" retorted Stormy Parshall. "And keep that red bandanna tied around yore neck so I'll know yuh from the other coyotes!"

As Thorpe strode toward the hitching rack, Parshall turned to his cousin, the

new, temporary deputy.

"Yuh had to butt in with yore tin star, didn't you?" he said harshly. "Yuh make me sick! I'll go and have myself a drink!" And he headed across the street for the saloon.

"Huh!" grunted plump Alex Loring, the well-to-do storekeeper. "Stormy Parshall bluffin' about bein' sorry that yuh stopped that battle when yuh did, Mr. Deputy! But he wasn't bluffin' Matt Thorpe any. When one man calls another one a thievin' coyote, he'd ought to be able to back up his words. Ought to be willin' to fight with fists, knives or guns, if that's what he's braggin' about doin'!"

"Yeah," agreed one of the two remaining loafers. "But blood's thicker'n water, Alex. Mr. Wilson here wasn't goin' to watch his dear cousin take a beatin'—not while Mr. Wilson had a tin star and all the official authority that goes with it!"

Bob Wilson flushed but answered quietly.

"I done what I thought was the right thing. Thorpe was high and—"

"Not too high to beat the devil out of Stormy Parshall, though," replied the loafer.

"We won't argue about it," Bob said shortly, and headed for the door.

"Nope. Us common men don't dare argue with the law," were the words that followed his through that door. Words that burned his ears as he walked down the street.

A FINE start he'd made on this first day he'd worn a star, thought the young deputy. And wished now that he'd chosen some other range on which to try for a star-wearing job. This job, although it might not be quite so temporary as people in Trailbend thought, might not be permanent, either. Fred Munroe, long a deputy for this end of the county, had told Bob confidentially that he might resign. But there was nothing certain about it.

Now, getting off to such an unpopular start, Bob wasn't at all sure he wanted his new job to be permanent. There was the threatening situation out in Antelope Valley, his cousin battling all the time with a neighbor. An ever-mounting enmity that could end in shooting.

Well, in declaring that his cousin had once possessed a better disposition than he had now, Bob hadn't lied. It was living neighbor to Matt Thorpe, who angered and tormented him, that had changed; made another man of Dave Parshall. But even so Parshall refused to sell his little horse ranch or leave Antelope Valley. He had been there before Thorpe, he said, and he had full intentions of staying.

Perhaps, however, Thorpe would be forced to leave. Having borrowed heavily on his little bunch of cattle, and having spent much of that borrowed money for whisky, financial difficulties were now staring him in the face.

Parshall had wanted Bob Wilson to come to Antelope Valley and work there with him. But Bob hadn't taken to that proposal. His cousin had grown too cantankerous. And, besides, Bob had always wanted to wear a star. Not for the authority it represented, but because, as a kid living in another Western state, he had seen his father, a sheriff, go down under the bullets spewed from outlaw guns.

One of those bullets had put a small nick in the jaw of a ten-year-old boy that day. A little scar that Bob Wilson still carried as a reminder. Perhaps that was why Bob had wanted to wear a star. It was in his blood.

IT WAS late afternoon when Bob Wilson, and all of Trailbend, received the news that the battle started in Alex Loring's store that morning had reached its end out in Antelope Valley. The news was brought by a stranger, a gangling man with short torso, but long arms and legs, who came loping into town and pulled up in front of the hotel.

"There's been a killin' in Antelope Valley!" he said excitedly. "I was comin' down the mountain slope above, huntin' a ridin' job for myself, when I heard a gun cut loose three times. I spurred up a little, and seen a big, dark-complected feller tryin' to keep from fallin' off his buckskin hoss!"

"Matt Thorpe!" chorused two excited voices.

"Don't know!" said the gangling stranger. "Don't know anybody in this country. Nor I didn't know the other feller, the one that'd done the shootin' and was ridin' for the upper end of the

valley. But he was kinda heavy-set and was ridin' a black horse with stockin' feet."

"Stormy Parshall, blast him!" growled old Alex Loring. "And Thorpe's dead, eh?"

"The big feller? Yeah!" replied the stranger. "I thought I'd better hit for the nearest town and let 'em know. I might've tried fetchin' the killer with me, if I'd been packin' a gun. But I never pack one and—"

"We'll be packin' some!" yelled one of the men who had congregated about the rider. "And a rope! Come on, fellers! Let's get our horses and start ridin'!"

"What about you, Wilson?" asked Loring bluntly, and all eyes turned on the silent deputy. "Yuh ain't takin' much hand in this—not for a lawman. "Ain't yuh goin' to lead the boys out there? Is blood still thicker'n water?"

"Sure I'm goin' out there," Bob answered. "But I'll go alone. And when I ketch Parshall, I'll lock him up."

"*If* yuh ketch him!" shouted a bystander. "And if yuh *want* to ketch him. Yuh saved his bacon this mornin', but yuh ain't goin' to save no murderer's hide now. We'll see that he get's what he's got comin'. Matt Thorpe's as good a man any day as that danged, roarin' cousin of yores!"

"Yeah," Bob said coldly. "And a lot better customer of yores, Mr. Saloonkeeper. If you think I'm goin' to let a killer get away 'cause blood's thicker'n water, I'll take a couple of men with me—and—"

"We'll go now—as many as wants to—without bein' picked!" called an irate citizen who had already mounted his horse. "Come on, fellers!"

"And fetch that rope!" called another, heading for his barn.

BOB wanted to talk more to the gangling stranger, but there wasn't time. The deputy walked down the street, entered the livery stable and saddled his fleet sorrel horse.

He didn't ride that horse out upon the street. He left the stable via the back door, forded Trail Creek and was lost to view from the little town by the thick growth of willows and cottonwoods that fringed the stream.

As he forded the creek, Bob Wilson remembered another stream where, as a kid, he had fished for trout. And he remembered a day when, falling from a slippery rock into the swift current, he had been rescued from death by the quick and courageous action of an older cousin, Dave Parshall. The man called Stormy Parshall now—and murderer!

Bob had elected to keep out of sight of the posse which would soon be organized and traveling because he didn't want those riders to see how fast the sorrel could travel. If he could get to his cousin first, take him into custody . . .

The deputy swung away from the stream, headed for the protection of a big, steep-walled draw. He was riding through a little thicket of cedars when he suddenly brought his mount to a halt.

Another rider, a small man with a large hat dented into the highest peak its tall crown would permit, was emerging from the mouth of that deep draw, was circling the cedar-studded knoll over which Bob had started to ride, and making toward a dense grove which loomed, about even with the town of Trailbend, on this side of the creek.

Bob Wilson's eyes narrowed slightly as his gaze fastened on the gun worn by the small rider, then on another gun and belt looped over his saddle horn.

A movement down there at the edge of the grove attracted Bob's attention. Down there a gangling man, sitting on a tall brown horse was waving his hat. The man with the high-peaked crown waved back and then rode a little faster.

Rigid in his saddle, Bob didn't know which direction to ride now. He wanted to speed on to Antelope Valley, and he felt that something was going to happen in Trailbend. But, plaguing him, making him grip hard his saddle horn, was the thought that something had already happened in Antelope Valley—and something more, probably a lynching, would soon be taking place there.

Suddenly, the decision was made for him. A group of riders bent on dispensing justice as they saw it was already clattering out of Trailbend, thundering down the street which was concealed by the growth of willows and trees along Trail Creek. Hoofs that presaged doom, perhaps, for a man who had long quarreled with Matt Thorpe.

Bob touched spurs to his sorrel, en-

tered the draw and followed it swiftly for a quarter of a mile. Then, coming to a trail, he rode up the south side—and halted abruptly once more.

Off to the south he sighted a bunch of horses being driven along at a fast clip. And, even at that distance, the deputy's sharp eyes recognized the rider who was forging those horses southward—probably toward Willowtown. A squat rider mounted on a leggy gray mare.

Only an instant did Bob Wilson look. Then he whirled his sorrel, mumbled, "He's safe enough—at least for a while," and headed back toward Trailbend once more.

IT WAS several minutes later when Bob, afoot now, scurried up the creek bank at the rear of Alex Loring's store. He was almost at the back door when a gun cut loose within the log building. Then two men, one of them long and gangling, the other short—and trying to add height to his appearance by means of his high-peaked hat—came rushing out of the door. Both were carrying drawn guns.

The little man sighted Bob and, whipping up his gun, yelled a warning to his taller companion. Bob was just as ready for battle as these two men. The deputy's gun cracked sharply, and a leaden slug tore through the ribs of the small man whose own hurried shot went whistling just above Bob's shoulder.

The man with the peak-crowned hat spun against the legs of his long-geared companion who, thus hampered for an instant, fired wide of his target—that star on Bob Wilson's chest.

Before the gangling man could get in another shot, a bullet from Bob's gun was tearing into him, rocking him back on his boot heels and sending him, twisting in an awkward heap, across the body of his smaller companion.

Gun echoes were still ringing across the little town when plump Alex Loring, storekeeper, came stumbling to the door with a trembling hand pressed hard against his bleeding right shoulder. He looked at Bob, blinked and pointed to a canvas bag that lay on the ground beside the two fallen men.

"Danged outlaws!" he growled. "Took my money—nearly two thousand dollars. When they started to leave, I called 'em a name, and the one with the tall hat put a bullet into me. Would've killed me if I hadn't ducked just in time! That ganglin' ape. Claimin', when he was tellin' us about Matt Thorpe's murder, that he'd never packed a gun."

"He lied, didn't he?" said Bob coolly. "And maybe he lied about what he saw near Antelope Valley."

The deputy turned, looked back at the creek, then looked at the two men his bullets had cut down. "I've never seen 'em before today, but I know 'em now," he said. "The small one's Peak Crenshaw and—"

"Peak Crenshaw!" Loring echoed. "Shore. That peaked hat that everybody's heard about. Yeah! And the tall one must be Crenshaw's sidekick, Spider Dean! Spider! Who else'd have legs and arms as long as that. A pair of the worst holdups in the state. But yuh got 'em, Wilson. And when the odds was two against one. What I can't savvy is, how come yuh're here when yuh was s'posed to go out to Antelope Valley." The storekeeper rambled on excitedly.

He was still talking when there came a commotion down by the creek. Bob whirled, dropped a hand to his holstered gun, but he didn't pull the weapon this time. He just stood there watching the rider of a leggy gray horse, Stormy Parshall, leaping from his saddle and landing on a big, dark-faced man who had come scurrying from the grove behind the stream.

Matt Thorpe launched the same kind of attack upon his neighbor-enemy that he had this morning in Loring's store. But this time Bob Wilson didn't intervene. He just stood there and watched his cousin give blows and take them, swift, savage blows that smashed against Matt Thorpe's body until the big man began to buckle under the shorter man's attack.

Then Stormy Parshall began going for his enemy's face while old Alex Loring, forgetting his own injuries, stood there gaping beside Bob. It was a vicious, brutal fight there on the creek bank. But it was Stormy Parshall who battered the heavier man into a reeling, groaning defeat.

"Gosh!" Loring gasped when that battle ended. "I never thought that Stormy could do that."

"Maybe that's 'cause yuh've never seen

Stormy fight before," Bob answered. "But I'd bet my bottom dollar he could lick Thorpe. He'd have licked him the same way this morning if I hadn't stopped it.

"I wasn't trying to save my cousin's hide. I was only tryin' to stop something that might've ended up in a killin'—the same kind of killin' that Spider Dean imagined had already happened when he come down here to bait most of Trailbend into leavin' town!"

"Yeah," Loring answered. "Leavin' town so there'd be a clear road for the hold-up!"

STORMY PARSHALL called over to them. "Hey, Bob!" he cried. "Is that Peak Crenshaw and Spider Dean layin' over there?"

"Yeah!" responded the deputy.

"I thought so!" Parshall replied. "I thought I seen 'em hangin' around with Thorpe. And I knew that Thorpe'd be pullin' out to beat his debts one of these days. That's why, instead of drivin' a bunch of horses to Willowtown, I decided to come back here and warn yuh that some bad medicine might be mixed while the regular deputy was gone."

"Regular deputy!" Alex Loring snorted. "I'd like to seen Fred Munroe, old as he is, stop these two buzzards like Bob here did! Shoot it out with 'em and beat 'em at their own game. I've got some say around this county, and yuh're lookin' at our regular deputy right now, Mr. Parshall. And, some day, yuh're goin' to see him wearin' a sheriff's star! I'll bet all the money in this canvas sack on it!"

"Yuh've changed your tune since this morning, Alex!" Stormy Parshall called.

"I know!" replied the storekeeper. "And them gents that are ridin' on a wild goose chase'll be changin' theirs when they hear what I've got to tell 'em and when they see what yuh've done to Thorpe. The gent that finally showed his cards by throwin' in with Peak Crenshaw and Spider Dean!"

"What wild goose chase you talkin' about?" Stormy Parshall wanted to know.

"Come over here and I'll tell yuh," Bob said, grinning a little now. "I'll tell yuh how yuh murdered Matt Thorpe, and how yuh was supposed to be strung up to a cottonwood!"

"Huh!" grunted Alex Loring disgustedly. "Don't tell him about the bait that me, and some other gents in Trailbend, bit on! I'm ashamed to hear about it. But Stormy danged near murdered Thorpe with his fists. I know that much.

"I seen that with my own eyes. And I'll swear that Thorpe'll never look the same. Well, yuh're rid of your snake-neighbor, Stormy. And, knowin' him like I do now, I'm as glad as you are that he'll be goin' to jail, instead of back to Antelope Valley."

"Better lock Thorpe up, Bob, before he comes to and makes for that brush like the coyote he is," said Stormy, and he was actually smiling as he had used to smile at his cousin. "That's a deputy's business, yuh know."

"Yep," said old Alex Loring. "A deputy that's goin' to keep on wearin' a star!"

Bob Wilson listened to those words and felt considerably better than he had this morning. This first day hadn't turned out so badly after all, especially when he vaguely remembered that one of the badmen in the bunch that had killed his father had worn a hat with a high-peaked crown.

"There's Going to Be Trouble Here, Amigo!"

THOSE WERE the first words Bob Pryor spoke when he and Celestino entered the brawling boom town of Hamilton—a mining community overrun by gunslinging renegades! And his prediction proves true—in LORD OF THE SILVER LODE, a frontier action novel by Lee. E. Wells featuring the Rio Kid at his fighting best!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Dragoon Frank folded up at Tod Phillips' feet

TABLES DO TURN

By JACKSON COLE

Young Ben Hardwicke mixes some range savvy with elbow grease, and then lassoes him a sidewinder gang of outlaws!

THE worst of the trip lay behind them, but it had been bad at times and the three showed the effects of the dry trek across the desert and the slow, difficult climb into the Arizona mountain range.

The eldest of the trio, "Lonesome" Pete, whose last name his friends did not know, had withstood the rigorous journey better than the two powerful young cowboys. Lonesome Pete was a real desert rat and had spent most of his fifty years wandering around waterless, ugly country such as they were now in.

Ben Hardwicke had often marveled at the taciturnity toward hardship which Pete showed. "He's like an Apache that way," Hardwicke thought to himself.

Hardwicke knew that he had lost at least ten pounds from his tall, muscular young frame, going without water for long stretches to conserve the bitter, warm fluid in their canteens, eating stale biscuits and jerked meat, with maddening monotony of taste.

There were dark lines under his

Texas-blue eyes, and the seams of his bronzed skin gritted with tiny particles of the gray-white alkali dust with which the region was covered.

He was used to range life, on horseback most of the time, but Lonesome Pete had refused to take horses into the hills and had insisted on mules as more surefooted and better able to withstand the heat and dryness of the trip. A mule was smart but often stubborn about having its own way. And there had been long stretches when the men had had to dismount and lead the animals.

Hardwicke wore a sweated blue shirt and leather-reinforced trousers; he had his Stetson for a sunshade, set on his curly, lighthaired head. His jaw showed the determination which had brought him, without complaint, to this point. He had not yet reached twenty-five and within him were tremendous physical reserves; he had drawn upon them, heavily.

Of course ahead of him, inexorably attracting him as a powerful magnet pulls steel, was the gold. This, too, had prevented Hardwicke's friend and saddle mate, Lew Rolls, from quitting and returning to the Circle 4, the spread for which the two had been working as punchers the past three seasons.

Rolls was slimmer, of darker complexion and more saturnine mold than the blonde Hardwicke. He had a bitter tongue when he was riled and he was quick to grow angry. Black beard stubble stood out on Rolls' thin face, screwed up in tortured distaste at the heat of the broiling sun which dehydrated the flesh.

THE sunny sky had a bronze, furbished quality to it, which gave a victim the impression that he was trapped in a tremendous metal bowl on which someone was playing jets of fire.

"Come on, Pete," snarled Rolls, turning his head as though his neck were stiff—which it was. "Why in blazes do yuh keep lookin' back thataway?"

"I don't like the sky," Lonesome Pete replied.

"Me either. But why look at it?" Rolls tried to spit in disgust but his mouth was too dry.

"Come on, boy," Hardwicke warned evenly. "We're almost there."

Rolls' narrowed black eyes widened and some of the deep wrinkles smoothed from his high forehead. "Right. Sorry, Ben."

"Forget it."

He looked at Lonesome Pete. Pete had a round head and pepper-and-salt whiskers growing out like a fan. Small, beady but undaunted blue eyes looked out from under his battered felt hat. He never wore anything else in the way of headgear any more than he changed the dilapidated suit and the cracked old boots he had on.

"We're nearly there, ain't we, Pete?" asked Hardwicke, and he had to swallow several times to get the words out.

"Yeah, boy."

Pete looked around again; he shook his head once.

It was Hardwicke whom Lonesome Pete liked. The old fellow had hunted gold and other precious metals all his life, and he had never had any real luck.

He was queer, everybody said, having been alone so much he found it difficult to talk to other men, though he kept up a muttered conversation with his pet mule, Susan, which the animal evidently contrived on her part by movements of her large and sensitive ears. This had irritated Rolls after a time.

A year before, Lonesome Pete had stopped at the Circle 4, where Hardwicke worked. The prospector had been down and out, and he was seeking a grubstake but no one would help him out. So dejected had Pete appeared that Hardwicke's heart had been touched; he was a happy-go-lucky range rider, and had shelled out three months wages to make Lonesome Pete contented. Pete had shaken hands and solemnly sworn him in on the next prospecting trip. The boys had kidded Hardwicke about his gullibility, and then after a time, it had been entirely forgotten.

Then Emily Curtis, the boss' daughter, had come back home from her eastern school. It had changed Hardwicke's idea of life; he had suddenly grown ambitious. He was no longer contented to ride the range at wages for another man but he must have a ranch of his own, fit for such a queen as Emily. Saving thirty per month was too slow a way, and yet there seemed no other.

And at that moment Lonesome Pete showed up, returned from his long trip into the southern mountains. Even when Pete claimed he had hit "it," Hardwicke

did not comprehend what the old-timer meant. Lonesome Pete had always been a false alarm, and it was not until the ore samples Pete had brought back were assayed that Hardwicke suddenly realized he could be rich overnight.

He did not want gold for itself, but he wanted what it could buy. With it he could amass vast acres on which to run cattle and above all the ability to give Emily Curtis the home he was determined she should have.

There was another cowboy who rode for the Circle 4, Tod Phillips, a big, broad-shouldered young devil who had a reckless way with him. He came from Nebraska and wore the flat Nebraska hat. He had proved to be Hardwicke's rival, for he had a ready wit and a quick smile.

Hardwicke had hated to leave Phillips a clear track for the six weeks he would be gone. But the fact that when he returned he would buy in as a cattle king, had forced him into the desert and the mountains.

"Which way now, Pete?" croaked Rolls, pausing as the drywash they were following branched.

"Right," answered Lonesome Pete. Then he volunteered information, something he seldom did. "See that big blue-gray cliff above? We got to git over it, boys."

"Why that's mountain climbin'," gasped Rolls, craning his neck to look at the breath-taking height.

Lonesome Pete shook his head; he looked back once again.

"We'll camp here tonight," he said.

So near now, Rolls and Hardwicke were impatient to get to the destination. They were up before dawn and after a quick breakfast and a drink, they hurried Lonesome Pete on. Getting up on the shelf over the cliff was a difficult feat but they accomplished it before the sun grew hot.

They found themselves on a level park that was like a very wide shelf cut into the sered mountain. Some herbage grew about for the mules, and Pete showed them a tiny but deliciously cool trickle of water issuing from the bulging mountain rock that loomed at the rear of the shelf.

"Siesta," said Lonesome Pete, and went over into the shade of overhanging rock.

"Oh, come on, Pete. As long as we're here, let's see it," Lew Rolls cried.

NOTHING would budge Lonesome Pete. He lay down and closed his eyes. The two young men got out the mining tools—short-handled picks and shovels, and flat washing-pans. Then they hunted in the vicinity for some hint or sign of where Lonesome Pete's gold mine was.

They followed the wide shelf to its limit to the south, past where it swung around the overhang, close to which Pete was sleeping, but the search was fruitless and, hot and tired, they started back to the spot where they had left the old prospector.

"What's that?" Rolls growled.

"Someone yelled!"

They dashed on around the bend and then stopped short as they saw the eight men, running toward Lonesome Pete.

"Hey, there's Tod Phillips! How did he get up here?" gasped Rolls.

"Who's that with him, anyway? They must've followed us, Lew!"

It was an old dodge, secretly trailing after the finder of a gold or silver strike.

At that instant Lonesome Pete leaped to his feet, thrust his hand inside his worn blue shirt, and pulled out an ancient Frontier Model Colt .44.

"Put down that gun, yuh old goat," roared a broad-bodied, mean-faced man out in front of Tod Phillips.

He had a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun in his wide, stubby-fingered hands, and he threw the weapon up, aiming at Lonesome Pete.

Hardwicke's forward progress checked as he dug in his heels, sliding on the loose shale; his hand flew to the pistol at his waist—only to slip on past, and then he realized that he had unbuckled his belt and left it in camp, as had Rolls, for it was an impediment in digging.

"Cut it out," Hardwicke yelled.

But Lonesome Pete's old eyes flashed hard as agates; he pulled back his hammer spur and raised his thumb and the Colt roared. The broad-built fellow's hat flew off as though suddenly snatched by an invisible hand.

The shotgun sounded on the revolver's echo, and wadded buckshot drove into Lonesome Pete's body. The second barrel roared on the heels of the first, and Pete went down in a bloody heap.

Hardwicke was appalled. Men would

kill for gold, and yet the murder was brutal, inexcusable, for Lonesome Pete had only fired a warning shot, after all.

He snarled, starting at the killer.

The mean-faced fellow threw aside the shotgun and whipped out a revolver, turning on Hardwicke, but he did not fire as he saw that the cowboys were both unarmed.

"Calm down and reach, boys," he ordered coldly.

Tod Phillips, who showed the effects of the long run on the trail of the three, as did the rest of his gang, swallowed and his face went a shade greener.

"Looka here, Frank, I never said I'd go in for killin'—" he began.

"Frank" swung on him with a scowl, and cursed him. "Yuh fool! The old punk was no use anyways and he pulled a gun on me, didn't he? And after all, I'm here by yore invite, Phillips. Keep yore nerve with yuh, savvy?"

Phillips shied away, backed down and shut his mouth.

Cold fury and despair ran through Hardwicke at the murder of Lonesome Pete for which he felt partially responsible. It was because Pete had come to fetch them and repay his debt that he now lay dead.

Then his brain cleared somewhat, and he realized who the broad, fierce leader was.

"Dragoon Frank Cooney!" he muttered, and Rolls heard him.

"By the devil, yuh're right, Ben!" he exclaimed. "It's Cooney and some of his gang. What they doin' with Tod?"

This had already occurred to Hardwicke. The Circle 4 was a large outfit and it took in one county and part of the next. They lost plenty of steers in one way or another, and they knew that rustlers got some. Dragoon Frank Cooney's bunch who operated in that district no doubt took their share, but they had always managed to escape the law.

PHILLIPS had worked at the ranch about a year and now that Hardwicke thought of it, it seemed that more cattle were being lost during that time than previously. It was entirely likely that Hardwicke's shrewd guess as to what Tod was doing with Dragoon Frank was correct.

Hardwicke knew and so did Lew Rolls as the eyes of their opponents turned to fix them, that Cooney would never let them get back alive. They had seen him kill Lonesome Pete and that would mean a death sentence if Cooney were taken.

The fellows with Cooney and Phillips were of a hard stamp, tough-eyed, lowering of expression. Their clothing was of cowboy kind, but dirty and patched. Only their guns showed expert care and the fact that the weapons were often in use.

They were all in a bad temper, for the trip had told upon them. And their stealthy trailing had been cleverly done, Lonesome Pete and his friends had not suspected they were being dogged.

Lonesome Pete had had some sort of inner warning, given perhaps by a sixth sense which hinted of danger but it had not been definite or powerful enough to prevent him from coming to the site of his mine—for Hardwicke was certain that the gold strike Pete had made was close at hand.

"He'd never have gone for his hogleg thataway if it wasn't right here," he concluded. "He got rattled, savvyin' we'd been trailed."

The prospector's end was heart-breaking. Hardwicke's narrowed eyes were riveted to the pitiful, torn corpse, and evidently the sight of Lonesome Pete's remains annoyed Dragoon Frank, for the chief ordered, "We'll throw that over the cliff, boys; it messes up the landscape."

"Let me bury him decent-like," growled Hardwicke, taking a step forward.

Cooney instantly leveled a pistol at him. "Stand back, yuh jackass! 'Fore yuh're done yuh'll git plenty of diggin'."

Tod Phillips refused to catch Hardwicke's gaze. He had thrown in with these outlaws, over the gold strike, even if he had not done so before. Hardwicke had his hunch that Phillips might have been acting as Cooney's informer at the Circle 4.

"Show us where the mine is," ordered Cooney.

"What mine?" asked Lew Rolls innocently.

Cooney swore, hit him across the mouth with the back of his free hand, menacing him with the six-shooter as Rolls' face went deep-red and his fists clenched. Rolls would have thrown him-

self on the bandit chief had not Hardwicke said quickly, "Calm down, Lew."

"Who said we had a mine up here?" Hardwicke asked.

"It's no use trying to act innercint, boys," Dragoon Frank exclaimed impatiently. "I'll tell yuh why, and maybe it'll settle yore possum-play. Phillips and me got a friend works at the Assay Office; we savvy what Lonesome Pete done found. Tod knowed yuh'd staked Pete and he snuk up on yuh when Pete was tellin' yuh what he'd hit up here."

Hardwicke drew in a deep breath of the dry, hot air. That explained it, then. Cooney and Phillips were well aware of the value of those rich ore samples fetched out of the dry hills by Lonesome Pete and thus were ready to go to any lengths to win the strike for themselves. They had already proved this, by murdering Lonesome Pete.

"Throw that old buzzard over the cliff," Dragoon Frank said to Hardwicke and Rolls, but the former shrugged and folded his arms.

"Go ahead and shoot; I'll plant him but I won't do that, Cooney."

DRAGOON FRANK swore some more at them but then he went and got Lonesome Pete's rope coils and began to shake them out. The rope tangled up in itself, to Cooney's irritation.

"This is the longest hunk of rawhide I ever seen," he grumbled.

Hardwicke thought so, too. The amount of rope which Lonesome Pete had insisted they bring had annoyed Lew Rolls all the way up. Pete said they might need it for mountain climbing.

"You One-Eye George," ordered Cooney, "noose the other end around that chunk of meat's shoulders and we'll drag it over."

It was the work of minutes to slide the corpse of Lonesome Pete to the edge of the steep cliff. Dragoon Frank stooped, loosened the noose and took it off; then he spurred the remains over the lip of the precipice with his booted, wide foot.

"That's that. Now let's get to workin'. C'mon, you two. Take yore picks and dig."

"Where?" asked Hardwicke.

Dragoon Frank Cooney's patience was never any too long; the terrible march up here, dodging on the trio's trail, the killing of Lonesome Pete, had made his temper raw. He took a cursing start at Hardwicke, but there was a look in Hardwicke's eyes that held Cooney back for the moment.

"Why do yuh purtend yuh don't savvy, Hardwicke? I told yuh we're on," Cooney snarled.

"Yuh've made a big error, Cooney," Hardwicke replied quietly but firmly. "Y' should never have killed Lonesome Pete. He hadn't shown us where his strike was when yuh downed him."

"You lie!"

Hardwicke shrugged. Tod Phillips blinked nervously; he had come out into the open over this, and he had to win. Hardwicke knew what the stake was: it was Emily Curtis, the heir to the vast Circle 4 and all that she meant in beauty and wealth. The man who rode back with the wealth of Lonesome Pete's mine stood head and shoulders to win it. Phillips was good-looking in his spoiled, reckless way; he had a sly nature, too, that had fooled plenty of people.

Dragoon Frank Cooney smashed Hardwicke's rapid train of thought by taking up a short-handled miner's pick and thrusting it at him. "Take hold of it," snapped Cooney. He was getting dangerous. He tossed a shovel at Rolls, and, shrugging, the two partners accepted the tools.

"Go on and dig out that gold," said Cooney.

"We don't savvy where to dig; we were huntin' 'fore you came up," insisted Hardwicke.

Cooney turned, consulting in whispers with Tod Phillips and a dark-faced, half-Navajo breed who ran with the gang. The breed then collected sticks from several dead piñons growing on the nearby slope. Rolls and Hardwicke sat on a flat rock, and it was not long until they realized what the breed was doing. He was building a small but hot fire in which to heat the end of a short-barreled rifle.

Rolls shifted uneasily. "Goin' to burn us, Ben."

"Keep yore chin up," Hardwicke told him.

The smell of hot steel came to their widened nostrils. Then Dragoon Frank seized the stock of the carbine and touched the barrel with a spit-wetted

thumb, the sizzle attesting it was really heated.

"Hold 'em," he ordered.

Heavy hands seized the two prisoners and they were helpless. Cooney, his thin, wide lips set over his tobacco-stained teeth, slowly brought the hot gun muzzle to Hardwicke's bronzed cheek. Hardwicke dug his nails into his palms to keep from crying out, and when Cooney brought away the rifle end, there was a brownish sear on Hardwicke's left cheek.

"Want some more?" snarled Cooney.

"I dunno where it is," Hardwicke insisted.

Cooney burned him again; then he turned on Rolls, who swore furiously all the time but accepted the punishment with bravery.

Tod Phillips gulped; there was a floury look to his hide.

"S'pose—s'pose we could locate the mine, Frank?" he said.

Hardwicke stared curiously at the traitor. Evidently, tough as he feigned he was, Phillips could not stomach some things—not because he was halfway decent but because he was a coward.

Cooney shrugged; he laid down the gun, which had cooled off, and leaving a couple of armed men on guard over the captives, the gang walked down the ledge. They came back after a time, evidently as unsuccessful in locating Lonesome Pete's strike as Hardwicke and Rolls had been.

It was getting on into the afternoon. Cooney and his crew were tired out; they helped themselves to water and a flask of whiskey Hardwicke had brought along, and cooked up some of the trio's food. Hardwicke and Rolls were guarded but not molested again that day. At dark, Cooney ordered them tied hand and foot, and thrown in under the overhang of the mountainside.

The two were able to talk while the gang sat around not far off, heads together.

"What you think, Ben?" Rolls said.

"It's up to us, Lew. They'll never let us out of here alive, whether they find the gold or not."

"Yuh're right. That Phillips is the slimiest devil I ever hope to hafta look at."

"Yeah. Cooneys out-and-out ornery, and admits it. But I do hate a spy like Tod. He's yeller, too."

SOMEHOW they managed to get to sleep. Dark had fallen over the seered, ugly mountains that reared themselves from the waterless desert. Restless, however, Hardwicke came awake later on. A hot wind was blowing up from the ovenlike Sonora deserts to the south, stirring the dry seed pods of mesquite and other thorned growth. Low voices reached Hardwicke's ears.

One was Tod Phillips', the other Dragoon Frank's.

Phillips said, "Look, Frank, yuh ain't figgerin' on turnin' 'em loose, are yuh? It's no good to me if they ever git on home to squeal. I'm in this to win Emily Curtis more'n anything."

"Don't fret," Cooney assured. "They'll never tell. But I mean to git some work out of 'em first. I can't make out whether they savvy where that gold is or not. But tomorrow they'll start diggin' and they'll find it or—" Cooney lapsed into horrible profanity. "It must be close to here or that old desert rat Pete wouldn't have got so excited and gone for his iron."

Dragoon Frank had finally reached the same conclusion that Hardwicke had: that Lonesome Pete's mine was at hand. Hardwicke heard the clink of glass on a stone and knew that the two were consulting a bottle while their gang snored.

After a time, Hardwicke went back to sleep; he roused several more times during the night but the only sounds he caught were the rustle of wind or the noisy breathing of his enemies.

At dawn, the outlaws kicked them awake and untied them. Hardwicke's hands and feet were numb and the cords had cut deep, whitened creases in his flesh. The blood returning to his limbs tingled as though someone were sticking needles into him.

But Cooney let them wash and drink at the spring; and then he threw them some breakfast.

"Yuh'll need it," Dragoon Frank leered. "Yuh're goin' to dig today, boys."

As soon as the two captives had eaten, Cooney cried, "Picks and shovels, blast yuh." And under the bandit guns the two began to work.

Hardwicke and Rolls, perforce, dug, and they dug hard, all day long as the sun came up to bake them. The callouses already on their hands grew sore and

[*Turn to page 86*]

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4TH WAR LOAN

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their backs ached; they were cowboys, not miners. Digging for gold for themselves would have been bad enough, but knowing that if they found Lonesome Pete's rich vein it would go to Cooney, Phillips and their bunch, and that their own reward would be instant death, the work was sheer, unadulterated torture.

Hardwicke took it better than Rolls; the slimmer cowboy had a more impatient nature.

There was always at least one armed man and sometimes several watching them. The outlaws hunted along the ledge themselves but they shunned any hard labor.

Hardwicke racked his tiring brain for the way out but he could see none, except to force a bullet and death. As it was, Cooney and Phillips were growing progressively more uneasy, tempers frayed. They feared they might be come upon and were weighing whether it was worth the diminishing chance of uncovering the gold or whether they should make the best of a bad job, kill off the two witnesses, and call it a day.

As they paused for a drink, Hardwicke whispered to Rolls, "We can't stand much more of this, Lew."

"Yuh're right. I'm just about finished now, Ben."

"I'm goin' to try something; play along with me, boy."

Dragoon Frank Cooney was eyeing them; they could not pause long.

Hardwicke went back, took his pick; then he flung it down again with a curse, and called to Cooney, "C'mere. I give up."

Cooney strolled over, Tod Phillips silently padding at his heels.

"Well?" demanded Dragoon Frank.

"We can't keep this up forever, Cooney. I'll tell yuh what I savvy, and that's all I can do. I'm not sure where Pete's mine is but I believe it's in that bluff, at the back of the camp. Somethin' he said makes me believe it."

Dragoon Frank turned and studied the jutting, rocky bluff; it was composed of sand at one point, a sliding bank.

"What did he say—I don't see nothin'."

"Said he'd covered it, and no one but him could find it."

Ben Hardwicke was making it up as he went along, his ulterior motive the hope of escape, but Lew Rolls nodded as though agreeing with everything his partner said.

"I've figgered it all out," continued Harwicke, "and I believe I got it, Cooney. If we find that gold for yuh, will yuh give us a split and let us go? We promise to keep shut and no hard feelin's." Hardwicke knew very well that they would not be released, but he wanted it to sound convincing.

Cooney at once nodded. "Why, shore, we'll let yuh go if you help us. What yuh got to say?"

"It's my idea that Lonesome Pete, 'fore he come out to fetch us, got up above there and slid down a lot of sand to cover the vein he'd found. The top looks fresh, it ain't as weathered as the rest of the ground."

This last was true; but in eroded country such as they were in, new slides were very common. Cooney blinked.

"Maybe. S'pose yuh dig there, and dig fast."

"Okay. But we'll need some logs for shorin'; the sand will keep slidin' in on us."

"There's an ax; go cut 'em."

Rolls didn't understand but he followed Hardwicke's lead. They cut a number of poles, and, returning to the bluff near the camp, set to work at the huge sand slide. Hardwicke really worked now, and Rolls followed suit; they dug into the sliding gray stuff, and kept building the shoring at the sides and roofing so they could get back into the bowels of the bluff. Uprights at the sides held the roof precariously over them.

THE bandits sat around the camp, their shotguns and rifles leaning close at hand, belted six-shooters in holsters, ever ready. Now and then Cooney or Phillips would get up out of the shade, and stroll over to see how they were coming.

Raucous cries from the hot air caused them all to stare outward; big Mexican vultures were wheeling in the sky, then dropping down below. "They got somethin' to eat down there," Dragoon Frank Cooney growled. "Reckon it's the old desert rat they're feastin' on."

"I'm plumb tuckered out, Ben," gasped Rolls, trying to wipe non-existent sweat off his brow, for it was too hot to lose moisture.

"We're near finished," whispered Hardwicke. "Do what I say now: yell like blazes and follow me, savvy?"

One of Cooney's devils was close at hand, on guard. The rest, including Cooney and Tod Phillips, were only a hundred yards away, lounging in the camp on the ledge.

Hardwicke drew in all his breath and let out a shout of triumph.

"Cooney! Hey, we've hit it!"

Rolls blinked but began jumping up and down, and yelling, "We've hit it. We've hit it!"

"Gold!" bellowed Hardwicke, rushing out and waving his hat, with Rolls at his heels. "Gold! It's a vein a yard wide!"

The bandits were electrified; no man could resist that call. The guard leaped up from his rock and started into the shored tunnel, while Dragoon Frank Cooney, Tod Phillips and the rest jumped to their feet and dashed full-tilt to the scene, crowding in, fighting for a look at the fabulous treasure.

All but one was inside and Hardwicke couldn't wait; he belted the outlaw in the jaw with his shovel, knocking him backwards, and kicked out the single master upright post which he had cunningly arranged to hold the roof in front. The heavy sand overhead shoved in the scant framework of the little roof and there was a dull thud as it fell. Instantly dust and sand filled the air in the immediate vicinity, and even before the full crash, Hardwicke had started to run, seizing Rolls' arm.

"Get those shotguns," he gasped.

Muffled oaths came from the fallen sand, as the startled, furious outlaws fought blindly, eyes and mouths full of the grit, to get out.

Hardwicke and his partner had almost reached the leaning shotguns at the camp when a bullet struck Hardwicke in the left arm, tearing the flesh; the man he had knocked over with the shovel had managed to pull himself together to make the shot. Rolls grabbed a shotgun, turned and pulled both triggers at the crouching figure. The scattergun roared and the buckshot, widening out, caught him in several places.

Hardwicke pulled himself together, fighting off the shock of the flesh wound. Blood was flowing from his injury but he wasn't crippled and excitement sent

[*Turn page*]

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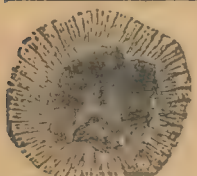

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power into him, with the surety that this was their big chance, their one opportunity to live. Cooney would kill them on the instant for this.

Already the sand-covered, angry figures were emerging from the layer of sand which Hardwicke had so cleverly dumped on them. Hardwicke seized another shotgun and cocked it; they crouched by rocks, as Dragoon Frank Cooney appeared, rubbing his eyes clear, swearing a blue streak, and pulling his six-shooter from its sheath.

"Where the devil are they!" bawled Cooney, infuriated beyond all control.

"There they are—at the camp!" shrieked Phillips, pointing. "They got our guns!"

DRAGOON FRANK COONEY threw up his six-shooter and let go. The slug bit a chunk off the rock close to Hardwicke's head and he aimed at Cooney and pulled the trigger. The shotgun kicked at his firm shoulder and Cooney threw up both his arms, his pistol exploding into the air for the last shot it ever made. Dragoon Frank folded up at Tod Phillips' feet, broken in the middle by the heavy pellets. One of them cut a chunk from Tod Phillips' cheek, the blood gushing in its wake. Phillips at once screamed for mercy, and fell down flat, arms stretched out.

Rolls let fly with both barrels an instant later, and the lead tore into the bunched figures of the outlaws. Screams and profanity rent the air; Cooney, Phillips and two more were down and the rest suddenly quit.

"Lay off—we surrender!" one yelled.

He raised his hands, and his pals followed suit. They were caught against the bluff with nothing but their six-shooters while Hardwicke and Rolls were in the rocks, scatterguns aimed.

"Phillips!" called Hardwicke sternly, "get up! Yuh ain't hurt bad. Get up and start tyin' them skunks pronto, or I'll let loose at yuh special!"

The hulking Phillips raised himself to his hands and knees; the gleam of his eyes showed yellow with his fear.

Ten minutes later they were all trussed except Tod, and Hardwicke attended to him personally.

"I don't know how yuh done it, Ben," Rolls said admiringly, "but yuh did!"

Cooney and another outlaw were dead.

Three had wounds, more or less serious. "We'll plant 'em, to keep the buzzards off," growled Hardwicke. "We ain't the sort who throw bodies off cliffs." When they had all the arms collected, he had Rolls untie Phillips and another bandit who wasn't hurt badly.

"Take them shovels and start diggin'. Yuh'll bury yore friends if it's the last thing yuh do."

Phillips was cowed, beaten; the two set to work.

Hardwicke and Rolls kept their guns handy and their eyes open, as they washed up, then Rolls bandaged his friend's wounded arm. They drank and ate, as Phillips and the other man made the graves of Cooney and the Navajo breed.

The vultures kept crying out and wheeling in below the lip of the precipice, and Hardwicke at last went over, lay down and peeked over the edge.

"They're after pore Lonesome Pete, sure enough, Lew. He's caught down there."

He got up and went over to the snarled ropes which they had brought in with them. It took him some time to get them untangled, and then he hunted for a place to snub one end. Up the bluff, close to the sand slide which had saved their lives, he found a thick-trunked, stubby pine, well-rooted and braced by

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a jutting arm of rock. As he began to fasten an end of the strong rawhide rope to the bottom of the tree, he noticed that bark had been rubbed off it, but he was in a hurry and still excited by the events that had occurred.

Rolls was carefully guarding the diggers, Phillips and his outlaw mate, but noted what his partner was doing out of the corner of one eye.

"What's up, Ben?" he asked at last.

"I'm goin' down after Lonesome Pete; he deserves a decent burial and it won't be in the same hole as Cooney."

"Okay. But first let's tie up Tod and the other; we can't take any chances in case I need to help you."

This done, the long rope was let down over the edge and carefully run on a smooth log so it would not cut itself. Hardwicke lowered himself over the edge and, feet braced against the eroded cliff face, slowly descended hand over hand, brushing the rock face.

He glanced down once but the drop past the ledge made his head swim.

The protrusion of the second ledge was very slight, and the vultures resented his intrusion and ranted at him as he landed, to see Lonesome Pete's body caught there, crumpled on the gray, rough rock.

Hardwicke quickly took a couple of turns under the shoulders and made a knot, though the rope was almost played out. Occupied with the task of rescuing what was left of Lonesome Pete, he raised his eyes to signal Rolls, waiting at the top, to hoist away.

The back of the ledge, which was undercut, was shadowed. But suddenly as he looked, the light hit it right and there it was, the dull gleam a man couldn't mistake.

"Lew!" he screamed frantically, nearly falling off the ledge. "I got it!"

"Well, you want me to pull it up?" asked Rolls, thinking he referred to Lonesome Pete.

"No. It's the gold! A big vein in the cliff and a yard wide, just like Pete said. It's down here!"

Hardwicke knew he had won. As he examined the fabulous vein further, he muttered, "Now I savvy what Lonesome Pete wanted with all that rope!"

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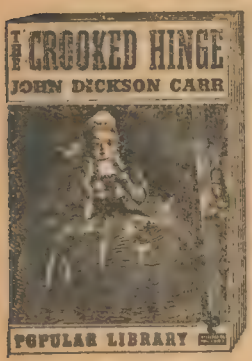

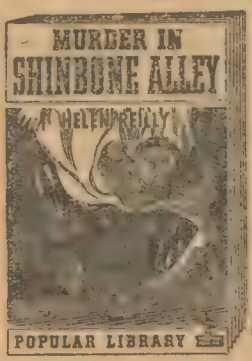

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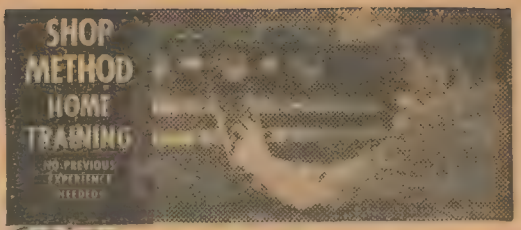

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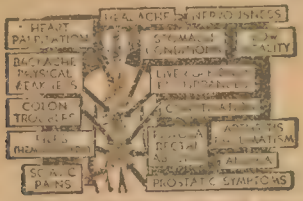

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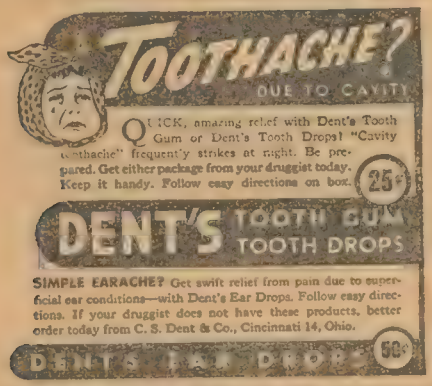
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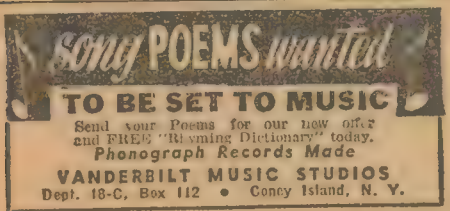
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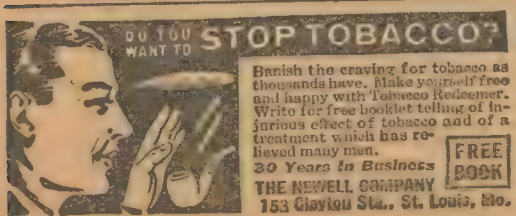
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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 9)

quite with his double-barreled shotgun thrown across his saddle-bow, when he thought he saw a slight stirring of the bushes in front of him a little way to the right.

Swinging his gun very quietly into position for use, he rode steadily toward the bush. Just before he reached it, a man leaped suddenly into view with his revolver drawn and called: "Throw up your hands."

Instantly, with both barrels of his gun cocked, Kitchen covered the fellow and said: "Throw up your hands."

The man dropped his weapon to the ground, threw up his hands and yelled: "Don't shoot, Pete! I wasn't going to kill you; I was only going to rob you!"

"Just what I was going to do to you," said Pete, "shell out."

The fellow did so, but the amount produced was only thirty-five cents. Pete threw him back a quarter, and said: "Now clear out, and never let me catch you around here again!"

Horse Thief Trail

Kitchen was the executioner in a one-man posse lynching of a horse thief, according to one of the many stories that are told about the noted Western character. It is said that three bandits from Sonora stole three of Kitchen's favorite horses. He took up the trail alone while it was hot, followed them across the Border and, pursuing them day and night for about three days, at last came up with them.

One bandit was killed, one made his getaway and the other was captured, and Pete with his prisoner and his recovered horses started back. As soon as he recrossed the line in to Arizona and could safely do so, he made camp so that he could get some sleep, being dog-tired.

He knew that if his prisoner escaped while he slept he would not only lose his horses again, but in all probability his life, so it is said that the prisoner was tied hand and foot, with a rope around his neck, and was left on horseback under the limb of a tree to which the other end of the rope was attached. In telling the story it is said that Pete was wont to punch his listener in the ribs with his thumb and say with a chuckle:

"You know while I was asleep that dog-gone horse walked off and left that fellow hanging there."

His Own Boothill

Pete Kitchen had his own little "boothill." It was just in front of the ranch house. Here the outlaws and desperadoes whom he shot and killed on his premises were buried. He actually hung two bandits right near his boothill and buried them there.

Donna Rosa, being a devout God-fearing woman, burned candles on the graves of these badmen who had fought their fight, had finished their course, and had been sent to their eternity by the strong right arm of her husband.

Kitchen was not a great hand with revolvers. He preferred a shotgun loaded with

buckshot for short distance shooting, and a rifle of the buffalo variety for long range work. He never laid any claim for being extra fast on the draw, but was so unafraid, so cool when trouble was brewing that he was able to study his antagonist and anticipate what the fellow was going to do and was thus, it seemed, able to outwit them and beat them to the punch.

As a marskman he was excellent. He could hit the mark at a great distance. In the Apache raid in which his adopted son was killed, the boy, only about twelve years of age, had gone to the field with the Opata Indians to work. The lad grew drowsy after awhile, and fell asleep in the hay, then came the alarm of attack. The Indians, as was their custom, ran for the house, forgetting for the moment the lad asleep in the hay.

By the time the field workers reached the house Pete had the guns laid out ready for action and when he saw that the boy had failed to come in with the others he knew well what the lad's fate would be.

Good Shooting

About this time an Apache lookout, posted behind a boulder fully five hundred yards from the house, rose up and waved a signal to the Apaches in the field to hurry up and start the battle on the ranch house. Pete drew down on this Indian in the brief moment that he exposed himself and killed him at that great distance. This kind of shooting was just too accurate for the Apaches to withstand and they withdrew.

Another story told of Kitchen's marksmanship is that three brothers from Chicago were visiting the old pioneer. One had been vacationing at the ranch for several weeks and

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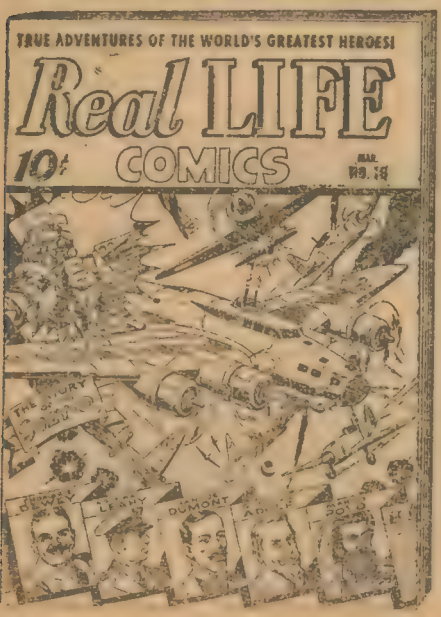

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had been on hunting trips with Pete and was supposed to have acquired quite a bit of marksmanship under Kitchen's tutelage. When the two other brothers arrived, there was immediately much bantering among the brothers about their shooting ability. Finally a small rock was placed about thirty paces as a target and the contest was on.

The two late arrivals shot first and failed to score, and it now came the turn of the brother who had been in Arizona long enough to claim to be something of an expert. Pete was standing in the doorway of the ranch house, some distance behind where the brothers were shooting and as the one who was to prove that he was an expert marksman prepared to shoot, Pete snatched his gun from behind the door and so timed his own shot with that of his Chicago friend, that none of the trio knew that any other shot had been fired, and as the small rock was shattered all three brothers thought that it was the expert shooting of the one.

A Reckless Spender

Finally, with the coming of the railroad, the old rancher found competition so strong that he could not make money as of old, so he sold his ranch for a goodly sum and moved to Tucson, where he spent the remainder of his days and all of his money.

He was not the type to live a retired life in town. He was not adopted to the soft, seductive ways of civilization in town. He was a free spender—generous and careless, he was not one to refuse aid to a friend in need. In town he had too much leisure, was a good "mixer," and an exceedingly good fellow, and about the only way to display these qualities was at the bar and the gaming table.

He was in high glory at the fiesta of St. Augustine, which was elaborately celebrated in Tucson in the early days. Few there were who did not take part in the revelry and gaming, and as for Pete, he patronized to the limit, with reckless hilartiy, the roulette wheel and the faro table.

The Beau Ideal

So it was that a pioneer who had risked life almost daily to build a home, to amass something of a fortune, in his declining years was writing the final pages to his life as would be expected in those times, for he was the beau ideal of the Border men of his day: brave, friendly, honest, frank, but also profane, a regular drinker and a diligent and delighted "knight of the green table."

These were his virtues and these the frailties of his time. It was because he combined these good and bad qualities in frontier perfection that he was so famous and so honored. So his money melted away, and at the end he had little in store except an unblemished reputation for honesty, a host of generous friends and admirers, and a pioneer record of hard and daring deeds well done. *Adios.*

FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE mining town of Hamilton, Nevada, was bad. So bad that two honest citizens, Jeremiah Donner and Silver Smith, met in the

office above Donner's store for a council of desperation.

"Silver, there's only one way out," Donner declared. "We've got to get us a gun-lawyer—an hombre that can shoot straighter and faster than these killers that're ruining our town. There's no other way to deal with snakes than to pull their fangs."

Silver Smith agreed somberly. Murder and lawlessness had become so open in Hamilton that it was fight or die.

"Who'll it be?" Donner went on. "Wyatt Earp is in Kansas, and Wild Bill Hickok is over on that range too. Martin Duggan's in Colorado. The Rio Kid is somewhere in New Mexico."

Duggan was a fighting black Irishman who was a terror with guns and fists.

"He'd take care of Barlow and the tinhorns," Smith nodded. "But Jed Harker an' whoever's behind him?"

"Yes," Donner agreed. "Duggan could never work out that puzzle. Nor Wild Bill Hickok neither. Earp might—but there's one man even better. He's smart, he can get to the bottom of crooked deals, and he's just as deadly a gunfighter as any of the others."

"The Rio Kid!" Silver Smith exclaimed. "Donner, we'll get both! Between Duggan and the Rio Kid we'll whipsaw Harker and pull the mask off the hombre who backs him!"

Thus begins LORD OF THE SILVER LODE, smashing new Rio Kid novel by your favorite author, Lee E. Wells, in our next issue.

A call for help to fight killers and criminals never went unheeded by Capt. Bob Pryor. So it was that a month later, the Rio Kid and Celestino rode into the brawling boom town of Hamilton. And rode straight into a fight.

An unarmed miner named Cramer was being goaded into a fight by a burly gunslinger with tobacco-stained teeth. Cramer threw a fist and Unger went for his gun. Then the Rio Kid flashed into action—and here's how Lee E. Wells handles it:

A gun roared and the flat sound bounced back and forth between the buildings. Unger yelled in pain and his six flew from smashed, bleeding fingers. Cramer plowed to a surprised halt, gray eyes swiveling around to the slim figure in blue who held a smoking Colt in his hand. Icy blue eyes held Unger.

"So yuh would have gunned down an unarmed man," the Rio Kid asked coldly. "Let's hear yore big talk now that yore fangs have been pulled."

But there were other snakes whose fangs were still intact

"My General!" Celestino shouted. "The others!"

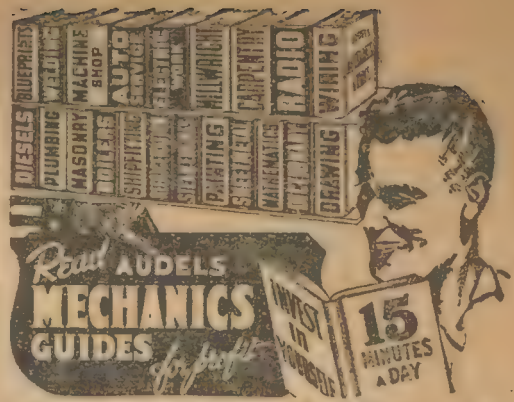
The Rio Kid whirled. The gunhawks had pushed through the crowd and now stood around him in a silent, deadly ring. Cold eyes watched him, taloned hands quivered over gun-butts. Thin lips pressed flat and the killer lust showed in half a dozen faces. Unger suddenly lost his fear.

"Blast him, boys! Give him a one-way ticket to boothill!"

Deadly as his guns were, the Rio Kid knew he was in a trap. But he and Celestino were saved by the sudden appearance of the town Marshal, Tex Adams.

Six guns turned on the killers took some of the fight out of them. And in a moment the crisis was past. But the result of that was a warrant sworn out for the Rio Kid by Jed Harker, boss gunman of the town, and shortly thereafter, Tex Adams was forced,

[*Turn page*]



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regretfully, to put the Rio Kid behind bars.

Duggan, the black fighting Irishman, came to see him there, with Donner, the storekeeper. And in jail the first council of strategy was held. Donner got the Kid's release on bail and swore him in as a special marshal. He, Duggan and Celestino were to help Tex Adams as undercover investigators, but most of all as lead-slinging gun-lawyers. So with his trial for "inciting a riot" still hanging over his head—a trial they knew would be fixed because Jed Harker owned the courts in Hamilton—the Rio Kid nevertheless moved upon the enemy.

Adams, Pryor, and Celestino walked boldly into the "Treasure"—saloon hangout of the gunmen. Adams issued clipped orders:

"Hamilton don't like gunmen no more, gents. Break up yore palaver and get out of town."

There was a hush then, the hush that comes before the roar of guns.

Dark and bloody times come to Hamilton, Nevada. Greed-crazed gunmen, wild for the clean-up in silver that has been promised them, launch a murderous attack on the thin line of honest men fighting back the tide of evil. Martin Duggan's roaring Colts, the Rio Kid's flashing sixes, the guns of Celestino and Adams stand alone against the swarm of hired killers.

And even in the ranks of the law, there is the seed of division. For Tex Adams is in love with Silver Smith's beautiful daughter. And he has seen her look at the strong, handsome face of the Rio Kid with intense interest. So jealousy is born in Adams' honest heart and, incapable of deceit, it gnaws there like a worm in an apple, poisoning his mind against the Rio Kid.

There is pace and color and action in LORD OF THE SILVER LODE that will hold you spellbound to the last page. You'll thrill to the daring exploits of your old friends and meet new ones—and you'll come across names you'll recognize, like Mark Twain, who as a young reporter spent much time in the silver country of Nevada. Be on hand to enjoy this great new Rio Kid novel next issue. There will be several exciting shorter stories you'll like, too!

LETTERS FROM READERS

WE'RE mighty proud of the yarns we've featured lately and we'd like to know how you all are enjoying them. Our job is to get bigger and better Rio Kid yarns for you all the time and while we think we've landed some humdingers, the final court of appeal is always you, the reader.

So write in, letters or postcards, we're not fussy, and tell us how you liked the last issue and all about it. We're always glad to hear from you and will print a few excerpts from your letters every issue. Just address The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Here's our first letter:

Just thought I'd drop you a line to let you know what I think about VALLEY OF VANISHED MEN. It was swell and I wish it was a lot longer. Your other short stories were swell, too. I've been reading western stories all my life, and will keep on reading them. I sure like to hear from Foghorn Clancy. He's a swell guy and a darn good singer.—*Robert Hudson, Olympia, Wash.*

Thanks, Bob, we're glad to know that you find the magazine swell and expect to go right on reading it. That's the kind of letter that makes an editor's life worth while. As for Foghorn, well, it's news to this old saddle-pounder that he sings—but maybe he does and Bob Hudson's scooped us. We'll ask Foghorn next time he ties up to our hitching post. Another enthusiast writes in to say:

Just a few lines to let you know I always read The RIO KID WESTERN because it hasn't any of that fancy stuff some Western mags have. I like the true historical characters. I think STOLEN EMPIRE was the best story to date.—*Carl Pandolfino, Mt. Union, Pa.*

Well, we're not quite sure what saddlemate Pandolfino means by "fancy stuff," but if he says we haven't got it, we haven't got it! And let that be a lesson to the dude-ranch school of Western fiction. We all like the true historical characters in our Rio Kid yarns, and Carl, you'll be plumb tickled to hear that there are at least three in LORD OF THE SILVER LODE, our next Rio Kid. There's Martin Duggan, famous gunfighter. Mark Twain, beloved American writer, and William P. Sharon, financial giant.

Oh, oh, here's a fly in the applesauce:

The Rio Kid is a swell character. But where do you get off, putting him in stories with characters like Wyatt Earp and making out that he is greater than all of these old-time gunfighters? I think Earp or Wild Bill would have taken the Rio Kid with his eyes shut.—*John Larkin, Tulsa, Okla.*

Now Johnny, don't get your blood pressure up. I'm afraid you misunderstand us. We're not trying to show that the Rio Kid is greater than the famous old gun-slingers of the West.

The Rio Kid is a fictional character, more or less our ideal of the perfect lone wolf lawman, quick on the trigger and just as quick with his wits. To make his adventures fit in with the times and to add color, we have shown him cooperating with actual historical lawmen of the time. There is no detraction from the laurels of the great; everybody knows how good the old boys were and the Rio Kid would be the first to admit it. Does that make it clear?

Well, folks, we've got to saddle up and quit the flat now. Be seeing you!

—THE EDITOR.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Wartime paper rationing makes it impossible to print enough copies of this magazine to meet the demand. To be sure of getting YOUR copy, place a standing order with your regular newsdealer.

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BY MARCH 15 fifty million Americans will have had to file income reports and make payments. All single persons earning more than $500 and every husband and wife either of whose individual income was $624 or more and everybody who paid or owes a tax on 1942 income must file a return.

This year taxpayers must compute income tax, Victory tax, and possible percentage of the partially forgiven 1942 tax—as well as make an estimate return on the current 1944 income.

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